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The Matrix

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Introduction

In *The Matrix*, everything is going on.

—Bruce Sterling,
“Every Other Movie Is the Blue Pill”

There is simply no overstating the importance of
science fiction to the present cultural moment,
a moment that sees itself as science fiction.

—Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*

In 1999, a film was released to the cinemas, of which many people in the film industry thought that it would be impossible to shoot and very unlikely to be understood by the audience. In spite of the difficulties they had to face, the young writer-directors, brothers Andy and Larry Wachowski, insisted on selling their script to a big Hollywood studio. “We told them it would be complex and dense,” said Larry Wachowski, in a rare interview about convincing the studio bosses, “but we were also going to shoot the best action scenes and coolest computer graphics ever” (Corliss, n.p.).

Indeed, the story seems complicated, but at the same time it contains all those elements that make a successful and exciting Hollywood-blockbuster, such as, “crashing helicopters, oodles of martial arts, a chaste yet passionate story of predestined love, bug-eyed monsters of the absolute first water, fetish clothes, captivity and torture and daring rescue” (Sterling, “Blue Pill,” 23). Eventually, Warner Bros. executives decided to form a pact with the Wachowski brothers, and their sixty million dollars project finally went into production. On the last Easter weekend “of the dying twentieth century” (Schuchardt, 5), *The Matrix* was released to the theaters across the United States—and the rest is history. Janet Maslin, a film critic for *The New York Times*, immediately became aware of the film’s great potential, as she concluded that *The Matrix* was a “mainstream American adventure with big prospects as a cult classic” (Maslin, n.p.).

Not only has the film become a cult classic among movie-fans and science-fiction enthusiasts, but certainly among scholars, as well. Many critics have noted that the Wachowskis “applied their college educations and their lifelong passion for ideas claimed by both the academy and popular culture in a film that appeals to a wide and inclusive population” (Barnett, 362). It seems that the Wachowski brothers were driven by the idea to create

a film that is open to diverse and multiple interpretations. Consequently, the critics enthusiastically accepted the offer to analyze, criticize, patronize, reprimand, but also to celebrate the Wachowskis. The challenging task of decoding this highly intriguing motion picture, however, seemed to appeal directly to many scholars' honor, since each book and article published about the film stakes a claim to knowing the whole "truth" about *The Matrix*—and nothing but the truth. Each new essay-collection that is published is labeled as the most "thought-provoking" and most "insightful" piece of criticism about the film. Publishers promise that only their book, or article, will help the reader truly and fully understand the many layers of meaning that lie in *The Matrix*. The essay-collection *Cyberpunk Reloaded*, for instance, is hailed as being the "One" among the numerous books written about the film, and apparently contains the most innovative readings of the science-fiction narrative. Moreover, William Irwin's successful edition *The Matrix and Philosophy* is described as the ultimate "red pill," which will enable the reader to uncover the mysteries about this truly intricate work of art.

Even though each critic acknowledges the fact that the authors of *The Matrix* have woven all kinds of different issues into their visionary narrative, most scholars analyze only one particular aspect of the film—and yet they insist on having produced the most profound and thorough analysis of all. Those scholars, in particular, who assume the role of the ultimate critical authority, are the ones who aim at exposing the Wachowski brothers as two naïve college dropouts, who take themselves too seriously. While certain critics accuse the brothers of being reactionary in their views, others remind them of the fact that theory belongs to the realm of universities, and not to Hollywood. Likewise, those commentators, who have nothing but praise for the film, are attacked by their colleagues for being too superficial and narrow-minded in their criticism. Evidently, *The Matrix* is addressing very sensitive and controversial issues and it is not surprising that passions run high, when this film is discussed. The question that is looming on the horizon, however, always remains the same—what is *The Matrix*?

The Matrix depicts an age in which people have literally lost all touch with historicity—a truly postmodern world, as Fredric Jameson would describe it. "It is safest to grasp the postmodern," he writes, "as an attempt to think the

present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (Jameson, ix). While the hero, Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves), is convinced that his life takes place in the year 1999, he is bound to find out that he is completely mistaken. By day, Thomas Anderson works as a program writer for a respectable software giant called “MetaCortex,” while by night he dives into the realm of cyberspace, where he assumes the hacker-alias Neo, who is “guilty of virtually every computer crime we have a law for” (Wachowski, 20). Neo is desperate to find information about the legendary hacker Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) –stigmatized as a wanted terrorist and “most dangerous man alive”– who, in turn, might give him an answer to the most pressing question of all—what is the Matrix? Indeed, one day his wish is granted and Neo gets to meet Morpheus, who offers him the inevitable choice between learning the truth and living in ignorance. There is an aura of mystery and conspiracy about Morpheus, as he tells Neo, “you have come because you know something. What you know you can't explain but you feel it. You've felt it your whole life, felt that something is wrong with the world. You don't know what, but it's there like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad” (Wachowski, 28).

Neo is invited to follow Morpheus and find out the truth about the Matrix, which is described as “the world that has been pulled over your eyes,” in order to conceal the fact that human beings are enslaved by intelligent machines, “born into bondage, kept inside a prison that [they] cannot smell, taste or touch” (Wachowski, 28). If he chooses to swallow a red pill, Neo can stay in “Wonderland” and he will see the Matrix with his own eyes – by choosing the blue pill, the story will end where it began. Of course, our hero opts for “red” and he is subsequently rescued from his prison cell, which looks like an “oval capsule of clear alloy filled with magenta gelatin” (Wachowski, 33). Later, Neo is told that he is actually living in the year 2199 and that the world he used know does not exist anymore, except for the “neural-interactive simulation” of life in the 20th century that is fed to the brains of billions of human beings, who are completely oblivious of it (Wachowski, 39). Furthermore, Morpheus explains to him that “at some point in the early 21st century...mankind gave birth to AI...a singular consciousness that spawned an entire race of machines” (Wachowski, 41). It

is unknown when exactly the war between human and machine broke out, but what is known is that the AI won. As a result, human beings are “no longer born,” but grown in endless fields of power plants, where the dead are liquefied, so they can be “fed intravenously to the living” (Wachowski, 41). It is the moment in which Neo learns the naked truth, and he cannot even bear to hear the answer to the nagging question—what is the Matrix?

“The Matrix is a computer-generated dreamworld built to keep us under control in order to change a human being into [a battery],” says Morpheus (Wachowski, 42). During the on-going war humans had scorched the sky, so that the machines could not rely on solar energy. Now, however, the AI are exploiting human body heat, in order to be supplied with enough energy. Fortunately, even in such a difficult situation, there is a small group of rebels who have been freed from the Matrix and who are fighting the machines, trying to liberate the rest of humanity. Finally, as if he had not received more than enough grim information, Neo also learns that he is the “One,” the long-awaited cyber-messiah with the ability to destroy the AI, annihilate the Matrix, and free humankind.

At first, it might seem astonishing that this particular film caused such an “uproar” among scholars from a variety of fields. On the surface, it appears as if *The Matrix* is nothing but a “furious special-effects tornado,” primarily aimed “at a generation bred on comics and computers” (Maslin, n.p.). Below the surface, however, the film offers room for wide-ranging and intense discussion about a number of issues crucial to postmodern critical theory, for instance. Moreover, various critics attest to the film’s proximity to the cyberpunk genre, since both the film and the genre are said to “share an obsession with negotiating our relationship with communication technology and its impact on subjectivity” (Melzer, 69). At the same time, religious scholars are debating whether *The Matrix* counts as a distinctly Christian film, or not. It seems that the film speaks to every viewer on a particular level, as it appears to be an inexhaustible spring of ideas and allusions to philosophy, theology, myth, popular culture, literature, mathematics—and the list goes on. One of the most distinguished writers of the cyberpunk genre, Bruce Sterling, is a declared fan of the Wachowski brothers, and in his article with the telling title “Every Other Movie Is the Blue Pill,” he enthusiastically

describes *The Matrix* as “one of the greatest achievements ever in the science-fiction cinema” (Sterling, “Blue Pill,” 25).

In my thesis, I will highlight the most vigorous academic debates surrounding *The Matrix*, and I will discuss selected articles, which focus on the most pertinent issues addressed in the film. In my opinion, the contentious discussions center on questions about cultural theory, with special regard to postmodern conceptions of subjectivity and the notion of so-called hyperreality, as well as on questions concerning theology. Hence, I will look at the development of the scholarly “war of words,” as it were, in terms of clarity of argument, and in how far the texts contribute to seeing the film in a more comprehensive manner. My research project will comprise three sections, which will focus on the most prominent academic debates about *The Matrix*.

In the first chapter, “Subjectivity, Self, and Cyborgs: Posthuman Bodies in *The Matrix*,” I will discuss one of the most widely cited articles on *The Matrix*, which is Laura Bartlett and Thomas Byers’ “Back to the Future: The Humanist *Matrix*.” The authors of this particular essay argue that Neo’s posthuman cyborg identity notwithstanding, his character is following a humanist agenda, promoting the idea of a unified subject. In stark contrast to this opinion, I will present Jenny Wolmark’s article, “Staying with the Body: Narratives of the Posthuman in Contemporary Science Fiction,” in which she argues that the posthuman bodies in the film, by all means, have the potential to undermine the stability of the unified humanist subject, by destabilizing gender binaries and portraying protagonists with obvious “gender trouble,” as it were.

The second section, “Welcome to the Real World – Baudrillard and *The Matrix*,” is dedicated to the intense discussion about the “correct” use of Baudrillard’s theories in the movie, and whether or not a Baudrillard-inspired movie immediately counts as postmodern. Felluga’s widely cited article sees *The Matrix* as a “paradigm of postmodernism,” mainly on the grounds that it adheres closely to Baudrillard’s theory of simulation. Gordon, on the other hand, rejects Felluga’s views and dismisses the film’s philosophical allusions as nothing but “intellectual poseur.” The question remains, whether the Wachowskis were intentionally flirting with Baudrillard and postmodernism,

only to create a commercially successful movie that was destined to make a fortune at the box office.

Finally, in the last chapter, “Messiah, Buddha, or Gnostic Redeemer? The Religion of *The Matrix*,” I will present the theological debate surrounding the various religious influences on the film. Paul Fontana, for instance, analyzes *The Matrix* from a Judeo-Christian perspective, and argues that one cannot miss the allusions to the Old and New Testament, or ignore Neo’s role as a messianic leader. James Ford, however, criticizes that many authors fail to address the equally conspicuous hints at other world religions, such as Buddhism. Frances Flannery-Daily and Rachel Wagner, on the other hand, argue that Gnosticism influences *The Matrix* more than previously assumed. While some praise the film for its liberal attitude towards theology, Gregory Bassham addresses the problems of “religious pluralism,” and remains critical of the Wachowski’s potpourri of religions and myths.

1. Subjectivity, Self, and Cyborgs: Posthuman Bodies in *The Matrix*

You're not human until you're posthuman.
You were never human.

—J. Halberstam and I. Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies*

You are the cyborg, and the cyborg is you.

—N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*

I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.

—D. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"

In their movie, the Wachowski brothers draw a very sinister and dystopian picture of our future—a future in which AI supersedes human intelligence and even threatens to put an end to human existence on earth. Fortunately, there is a relatively small population of humans, who are unwilling to embrace their futile existence as mere "brains in a vat,"¹ and therefore decide to fight the machines.

As might be expected from a Hollywood picture, the chosen few are not ordinary people, but rather reminiscent of invincible elitist soldiers. They belong to a group of humans, who were all previously freed from the Matrix. Later we learn that the reason for their superhuman abilities stems from the fact that their bodies are endowed with special interfaces, which enable them to jack into the virtual realm of the Matrix, where they fight against their AI enemies. Those interfaces –manifest as holes, or plugs, on their bodies– are presumably the result of bio-technological interference, while they were still plugged into the Matrix. Human beings are, after all, grown in hideous Matrix-pods, where they spend their entire lives as human batteries for the machines. At the same time, however, these cybernetic adjustments make it possible for the rebels to play tricks on the Matrix, as it were, for they can re-enter the simulated realm, and even learn how to defy gravity, dodge bullets, and fight like kung fu masters.

From the beginning of the film, it seems that *The Matrix* simply depicts another epic battle between humans and machines, but according to a

¹ In his book, *Reason, Truth, and History* (1981), Hilary Putnam makes the case for the "brain in a vat" thought-experiment. Putnam urges the reader to imagine that "our brains have been surgically separated from the rest of our bodies and placed in vats filled with brain-nourishing chemicals. A powerful computer then sends electrical impulses into our brains, giving rise to the illusion that we are sitting in chairs, reading books, playing tennis and so forth. All the while, though, our disembodied brains are actually floating around in vats" (Erion and Smith, 21).

number of critics, such a simplistic view would be misleading.² The fact that the main protagonists possess technologically modified, and thus significantly enhanced bodies, adds a new dimension to the intriguing plot. Thus, *The Matrix* becomes the enactment of the fight for the survival of the fittest—but on an entirely new level. Consequently, the film poses fundamental questions about what it means to be human in a world dominated by incessant technological innovation. Is this story indeed nothing but an excellent piece of late twentieth century science-fiction, or are we really moving toward a so-called “posthuman” future? And if the answer is yes, what does this mean, not only for the humans in the movie, but also for those watching *The Matrix*?

It is not surprising that critics can hardly come to an agreement, when it comes to the interpretation of the posthuman world, as shown in the Wachowski brothers' movie. The debate about postmodern subjectivity and questions of gender relations is very controversial and highly emotional. The crucial issue is the question whether humanity is indeed heading for self-destruction, by engaging in a fusion with intelligent machines, or not. One of the most cited articles on *The Matrix* is Bartlett and Byers' “The Humanist *Matrix*,” with a focus on postmodern subjectivity.³ The authors claim that despite Neo's obvious status as a cyborg, his character is promoting a humanist agenda, celebrating the notion of a transcendental, superior human subject. In her thought-provoking article Jenny Wolmark, however, follows a radically different line of argumentation than Bartlett and Byers, and draws attention to the way gender is represented in the movie. Wolmark argues that *The Matrix* aims at disrupting normative gender roles by portraying posthuman subjects who inhabit a “fluid” space between the real and the virtual, and therefore they are challenging the notion of a stable and coherent humanist subject.

Before I set out to discuss the two most intriguing, and clearly opposing, articles about *The Matrix* – Bartlett and Byers' “The Humanist *Matrix*,” and Jenny Wolmark's “Staying with the Body: Narratives of the Posthuman in

² For a similar theme in science-fiction cinema, see James Cameron's *Terminator* films (1984, 1991), for instance.

³ For a virtually identical line of argumentation, see Patricia Melzer's “Concepts of Subjectivity in *The Matrix*.” It is interesting that Melzer's article was published in 2004, yet she does not make any references to the well-known article by Bartlett and Byers, which was published in 2003 and caused quite a stir.

Contemporary Science Fiction” – I will give a brief overview of cyborg-theory as formulated by Donna Haraway in her “Cyborg Manifesto.” Furthermore, I will offer a succinct account of the “virtual” subject and posthuman identity, as described by N. Katherine Hayles in her book *How We Became Posthuman*. Both these analyses are crucial for a more comprehensive discussion of posthuman bodies in *The Matrix*. In addition to that, I will elucidate in how far the cyberpunk-genre has had an influence on *The Matrix*, and also offer other critics’ opinions about the film and the underlying debate.

1.1. The Cyborg Manifesto, or: Why we became posthuman

We need first to understand that the human form—including human desire and all its external representations—may be changing radically, and thus must be revisioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something we must helplessly call posthumanism.

—Ihab Hassan, “Prometheus as Performer”

As you gaze at the flickering signifiers scrolling down the computer screens, no matter what identifications you assign to the embodied entities that you cannot see, you have already become posthuman.

—N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*

In her (in)famous cyborg “manifesto,” Donna Haraway declared that a “cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway, 149). Haraway’s essay, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980s,” published in 1985 in the *Socialist Review*, has been so influential that the notion of the “cyborg” has almost become synonymous with her description in the manifesto.⁴ Her main aim at that time was not only to introduce her own definition of the cyborg, but also to find a new way of theorizing “what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century” (Haraway, 149). Haraway’s main arguments in the “Cyborg Manifesto,” however, do not only have deep implications for feminist theory, but for the entire Western civilization, since, according to Haraway, we all count as cyborgs by the end of the 20th century (cf. Haraway, 149).

⁴ Cf. Bukatman, 321.

Right at the beginning of her essay, Haraway proclaims that the “cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics” (Haraway, 150). Most importantly, however, it provides an entirely *new* politics, one that does not depend on the belief in a higher unity, for, as cyborgs, “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (Haraway, 150). Haraway imagines a “post-gender world” and calls for a “reworking” of the relation between nature and culture. Her aim is to show that the cyborg does not need to be coded as “natural,” and therefore does not depend on an “origin story in the ‘Western’ humanist sense” (Haraway, 151).

The greatest opportunity, or danger – depending on one’s point of view – of the cyborg, stems from the fact that it blurs the distinction between human and machine. That is precisely where Haraway detects a growing unease among those who strongly believe in the myth of “original unity [and] of identification with nature in the Western sense” (Haraway, 151). What is already referred to as “Haraway’s new cyborg mythology,”⁵ firmly insists on the radical dissolution of boundaries. Haraway writes that

[l]ate twentieth century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are *disturbingly lively*, and we ourselves are *frighteningly inert*. (Haraway, 152, my emphasis)

Haraway is aware of the fact that her ideas and suggestions are rather provocative to some extent, and therefore might strike others as quite outrageous (cf. Haraway, 177). Nevertheless, she is urging us not to be alarmed at the prospect of adopting “permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (Haraway, 154). We need to understand that only such radical shifts in perspective can enable us to “contest for other forms of power and pleasure in technologically mediated societies” (Haraway, 154). In the final section of the manifesto, entitled “A Myth of Political Identity,” Haraway emphasizes once again the seriousness of our current situation, in which a number of “troubling dualisms” have contributed to the “domination of all constituted as others” (Haraway, 177).

Those dualisms, however, can be shattered. As already mentioned, Haraway argues that highly developed technologies possess the ability to disrupt some

⁵ Cf. Bukatman, 323.

of those most persistent dichotomies, such as, self/other, mind/body, male/female, culture/nature, reality/appearance, God/man, or truth/illusion, to name but a few. Haraway welcomes a state in which it is neither “clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine,” nor is it obvious “what is mind and what body, in machines that resolve into coding practices” (Haraway, 177). If we embrace the cyborg as our ontology, our politics, then we acknowledge that there is no “fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism” (Haraway, 178).

Finally, Haraway underlines her two main arguments with which she aims at exposing the circulation of universal, all-encompassing theory as a “major mistake that misses most of reality” (Haraway, 181).⁶ Secondly, as cyborgs, we will learn to communicate with all our different body parts and come to accept the “partial and fluid” aspect of embodiment. Haraway concludes that a “cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden [and] does not seek unitary identity” (Haraway, 180). She insists that cyborg imagery has the potential to bring about change, because it means “both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships [and] space stories” (Haraway, 181).

1.2. “Mapping the Posthuman”⁷

In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles not only further explores Haraway’s theory of the cyborg, but also makes crucial observations about cyberspace and the intrusion of computers into our daily lives. She describes how the possibility of creating sentient machines poses a great threat to the liberal humanist subject. In a series of carefully structured steps, Hayles argues that the “historically specific construction called the human is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman” (Hayles, 2). The main reason for the emergence of this “new” posthuman identity is the proposition that human identity should be seen as an “informational pattern rather than an embodied enaction” (Hayles, xii). Hence, her claim that information “lost its body” (Hayles, 2). Another reason is, of course, the

⁶ Haraway is particularly suspicious of the totalizing meta-narratives of Marxism and Psychoanalysis, 181.

⁷ Cf. Hayles, 247.

emergence of the cyborg, as a “technological artifact and cultural icon” (Hayles, 2). As a consequence, the new posthuman subject does not regard consciousness as the “seat” of human identity, and does not see the body as immutable, but encourages the extension of the body by means of prostheses or other technological devices. Furthermore, the cyborg does not fear intelligent machines, but rather welcomes technological advance (cf. Hayles, 3).

Following Haraway, Hayles’ posthuman subject is described as an “amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles, 3). In another argument, reminiscent of Haraway, Hayles acknowledges that “being” posthuman does not necessarily require the presence of technologically altered bodies. She suggests that a “regular” *Homo sapiens* might also be described as posthuman, because the crucial and therefore defining characteristics of the posthuman “involve the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of non-biological components” (Hayles, 4). However, the “erasure” of embodiment for the sake of argument might also lead to an appropriation of the posthuman by liberal humanists. The liberal subject’s claim for universality also depends on a mind/body split, which ultimately tends to erase those important “markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, and ethnicity” (Hayles, 5). That is why Hayles is always weary of the ways the cybernetic posthuman is defined. For this reason, she calls for a posthuman that “embraces the possibilities of informational technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality” (Hayles, 5) – characteristics she identifies rather with the liberal humanist subject.

Moreover, Hayles argues that, especially towards the late twentieth century, “questions about the posthuman become increasingly urgent” (Hayles, 247). For her, it is not surprising that science fiction has played an important role in pushing the boundaries and exploring what it could mean to be posthuman. However, those questions are no longer simply a matter of fictional speculation in novels, comics, or movies. Although the posthuman is a relatively new concept, Hayles points out that there are already a number of cultural and technical sites that deal scientifically with the matter of

posthumanity.⁸ For most researchers discussed in her book, being posthuman means “envisioning humans as information-processing machines with fundamental similarities to other kinds of information-processing machines, especially intelligent computers” (Hayles, 246) – this is exactly what leads us the posthuman’s biggest problem among liberal humanists.

There is considerable resistance when it comes to happily embracing a cyborg existence, since many people have suspicions against the unknown, and are filled with the fear that cyborgs might pose a threat to the human race. There is growing panic over the vision that we might be heading toward a possible loss of free will and individual agency, for the posthuman cyborg radically challenges the boundaries and the “locus” of selfhood (cf. Hayles, 279). If the “seat” of human identity is shifted from “brain to cell,” then the “fragility of consciousness” is painfully exposed (Hayles, 279). As if in anticipation of the plot of *The Matrix*, Hayles suggests that “[c]onscious mind can be hijacked, cut off by mutinous cells [and] absorbed into an artificial consciousness” (Hayles, 279). The worst-case scenario is the extinction of the human race as a direct consequence of the change from human to posthuman and the close alignment with intelligent machines. Hence, the question raised in *The Matrix*, and in Hayles’ book, is whether the encounter of human and posthuman will be for better or for worse, and whether it will be seen as “an evolutionary advance or a catastrophe of unprecedented scope” (Hayles, 281).

In her conclusion, Hayles acknowledges once again that “the prospect of becoming posthuman both evokes terror and excites pleasure” (Hayles, 293). Those, however, who incite negative and pessimistic reactions to a posthuman future tend to distort the notion of the cyborg to such an extent that it seems nothing but apocalyptic and repulsive. The vision that the human race might become an obsolete species and could ultimately be replaced by intelligent machines is indeed a nightmarish scenario. Such a view inevitably calls for a firm resistance against a posthuman future, where the “*Homo sapiens* joins with the intelligent machines to create *Homo silicon*” (Hayles, 280).

⁸ Hayles mentions the fields of nanotechnology, microbiology, virtual reality, artificial life, neurophysiology, artificial intelligence, and cognitive science, among others (cf. Hayles, 247).

Hayles urges the anti-posthumanist critics to move away from the “apocalyptic and toward a more moderate view of seriated social, technological, political, and cultural changes” (Hayles, 285). Instead, much more emphasis should be placed on the pleasures that the posthuman evokes. Hayles sees the posthuman as the best opportunity to get out of “the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means” (Hayles, 285). Following Donna Haraway’s line of argumentation, Hayles hopes that the posthuman will first and foremost render dualities obsolete (cf. Hayles, 285). Last but not least, she points out that the most important thing to bear in mind is that the posthuman must not be seen as possibly antihuman. In this case, it might be “recuperated back into liberal humanism” (Hayles, 287). We need to understand that the posthuman does not imply the end of humanity, but rather a re-thinking and re-working of the concept of the “human.” The notion of the “autonomous self with unambiguous boundaries” needs to be reconsidered (Hayles, 287). As N. Katherine Hayles finally explains, the posthuman should not be regarded as a fatal move toward the apocalyptic. On the contrary, the posthuman actually signals

the end of a *certain conception* of the human, a conception that may have implied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. (Hayles, 286, my emphasis)

1.3. *The Matrix*: Humanist, Posthumanist, or Antihumanist?

The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry—techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self.

—Bruce Sterling, *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*

One of the most widely cited articles about *The Matrix* is Laura Bartlett and Thomas Byers' "Back to the Future: The Humanist *Matrix*," published four years after the movie was released. Unlike many enthusiastic critics who hail *The Matrix* as the "paradigm of postmodernism," Bartlett and Byers' reaction to such a claim is more reserved. Focusing primarily on issues revolving around posthuman subjectivity, Bartlett and Byers argue quite persuasively that *The Matrix* rejects "the posthumanist configuration of subjectivity in favor of resurrecting a neo-Romantic version of the liberal-humanist subject" (Bartlett and Byers, 30).

Bartlett and Byers' notion of the posthuman remains largely in accordance with Donna Haraway's and N. Katherine Hayles' definitions of the cyborg/posthuman, as discussed in the previous section. Bartlett and Byers, however, are slightly suspicious of Haraway's optimism, which derives mainly from the hope that this new fragmented and fluid subjectivity indeed has the potential to disrupt the tenets of Western liberal humanism, and thus pose a realistic and powerful threat to patriarchal capitalism. The authors of "The Humanist *Matrix*" align themselves with Hayles' more reserved optimism, which is still largely informed by an underlying fear that the posthuman subject might easily be appropriated by liberal humanism itself (cf. Hayles, 287).

Bartlett and Byers suggest that the notion of a "fluid" postmodern subjectivity may strike us as rather radical at first sight, while, in fact, it "bears uncanny similarities to the structures of global capitalism" (Bartlett and Byers, 29). Such a claim might seem peculiar, but, as they point out, "[f]luidity, flexibility, boundary-dissolution, and border crossings describe both" (Bartlett and Byers, 29). Hence, doubts are raised, whether Haraway's cyborg indeed poses any threat to the forces of patriarchal capitalism. Bartlett and Byers even go a step further, suggesting that it might be possible for the posthuman subject to be "recuperable by, or even produced by, late capitalism for the

latter's own ends" (Bartlett and Byers, 30). Consequently, the two critics argue that, despite *The Matrix*'s conspicuous flirtation with theoretical postmodernism and the depiction of posthuman subjects, the movie is ultimately "pomophobic" (Bartlett and Byers, 30). Even though artificial intelligence is presented as seemingly autopoietic, and the film's protagonists are not only metaphorical, but also quite literal cyborgs, "[*The Matrix*] rejects the human-machine articulation and seeks to preserve, as 'natural,' the organic human's dominant outside position" (Bartlett and Byers, 30).

It is not surprising that such views have been contested. Other critics, such as Wilhelm and Kapell, would completely disagree with Bartlett and Byers, and what might be perceived as the latter's one-sidedness. According to Wilhelm and Kapell's pragmatic point of view, it is basically irrelevant whether *The Matrix* promotes modern ideas with more vigor than postmodern theories. They believe that it is, in fact, "impossible to label [*The Matrix*] as belonging to only one specific school of thought, like 'modern' or 'postmodern'" (Wilhelm and Kapell, 127). Therefore, it is not central to the debate, whether Neo is the embodiment of the posthuman subject, or not. Instead, we should focus our attention on what his cyborg-self means for a new world-order. Wilhelm and Kapell reject interpretations of the film, which imply that there is a strict distinction to be made between a humanist and a postmodern concept of subjectivity. Instead of following such lines of argumentation, they argue that their pragmatic reading is supposedly the only way to understand "many of the difficult-to-answer questions about [*The Matrix*]" (Wilhelm and Kapell, 127). As they explain, "pragmatism concerns itself with issues of social hope, increased freedom, and choice," and that is precisely how the film should be approached, if we are to make sense of it (Wilhelm and Kapell, 127).

Before I go on to offer other critics' counterarguments to Bartlett and Byers' position, it will be necessary to have a more detailed look at their line of argumentation, as well as the film's close ties to the so-called cyberpunk movement, which had its heyday in the 1980s.⁹

⁹ Cf. Hollinger, 29-44.

1.3.1. Lost in *The Matrix*: Cyberpunk and the Posthuman Subject

It is perhaps in pinpointing society's need to buy into the allusion of free agency and individual autonomy that *The Matrix* is most disturbingly accurate.

—L. Bartlett and T. Byers,
“The Humanist *Matrix*”

Bartlett and Byers identify *The Matrix* as a cinematic example of the cyberpunk genre, but at the same time they claim that the movie is both an homage and an affront to the “c-punk” movement (cf. Bartlett and Byers, 30). In order to understand their ambivalent position, it is useful to consider Veronica Hollinger's influential article, “Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism,” in which she defines the genre of cyberpunk. For Hollinger, cyberpunk, as a more radical sub-genre of science fiction, is an openly and decidedly “anti-humanist” project that aims at breaking down oppositions between the human and the machine, as well as the natural and the artificial. The clear difference between “older” forms of science fiction and cyberpunk is, therefore, the fact that science-fiction only problematizes the aforementioned oppositions, but “it generally sustains them in such a way that the human remains securely ensconced in its privileged place at the center of things” (Hollinger, 30). That is precisely Bartlett and Byers' main reproach with regard to *The Matrix*, since they feel that the film “it repudiates the [cyberpunk] genre's antihumanist stance and seeks to reinscribe the nature/artifice binary that cyberpunk generally deconstructs” (Bartlett and Byers, 30).

Hollinger sees the emergence of cyberpunk, as a consequence of our current postmodern condition, which “has required that we revise science fiction's original trope of technological anxiety—the image of a fallen humanity controlled by a technology run amok” (Hollinger, 42). However, that seems to be the exact vision of the future as represented by the authors of *The Matrix*—the fact that humanity has been enslaved by artificial intelligence is certainly meant to inspire terror and anxiety at the thought of technological advancement. Nonetheless, this could still be read as in accordance with the c-punk genre, for, as Hollinger argues,

common to most of the texts which have become associated with cyberpunk is an overwhelming fascination, at once celebratory and anxious, with technology and its immediate—that is, *unmediated*—

effects upon human being-in-the-world, a fascination which sometimes spills over into the problematizing of “reality” itself. (Hollinger, 31)

The greatest problem of identifying *The Matrix* with cyberpunk, and thus with a clear and uncompromising posthuman agenda, is the fact that the film seemingly prefers the kind of subject that “may exhibit a sexy patina of postmodernism while still not differing in any fundamental way from its liberal humanist predecessor” (Bartlett and Byers, 29). Cyberpunk, on the contrary, produces a radically postmodern, posthuman subject as envisioned by Donna Haraway in her “Cyborg Manifesto” (cf. Hollinger, 35). As Hollinger argues, human bodies in cyberpunk stories are “subjected to shaping and re-shaping, [and] the human form destined perhaps to become simply one available choice among many” (Hollinger, 35). Hence, a possible preference of a “physical essence” of the human being, as detected by Bartlett and Byers in *The Matrix*, would certainly be an affront to the genre.

For Bartlett and Byers, the plot of *The Matrix* is not highly intricate in the first place, since it simply “boils down to a struggle between human beings and machines over human subjectivity” (Bartlett and Byers, 33). The technological advancement, which made it possible for the machines to separate consciousness from the materiality of the body, is represented as a veritable catastrophe, for it led to the enslavement of humanity. This scenario suggests that the ultimate triumph of posthuman subjectivity, with AI as its apotheosis, is the death sentence for the human race (cf. Bartlett and Byers, 33). The unique capacity of the human mind, however, to become aware of the deception of the virtual reality simulation of the Matrix, seems to underline “the ultimate autonomy and supremacy of human consciousness” (Bartlett and Byers, 33). Hence, Bartlett and Byers argue that the film advocates the notion that “the artificial system is still essentially allopoeitic or subservient to a humanity that remains in essence [...] autopoietic” (Bartlett and Byers, 33).

1.3.2. The Supremacy of the “One”

Even though it is explicitly shown in the film, to which extent Neo’s body has been appropriated and modified by the machines—his entire physique, from head to toe, is scarred by a number of plugs—Bartlett and Byers claim that he is not a revolutionary cyborg, as envisioned by Donna Haraway. On the contrary, they argue that he embodies the ideal liberal-humanist subject, and is “not merely the representative, but the apotheosis, of the subjectivity that is threatened by the AI” (Bartlett and Byers, 34). It is a problematic suggestion, actually, considering Neo’s highly ambivalent subject-status. On the one hand, he is hailed as the “One,” who has the extraordinary capacity to fight and possibly defeat the machines, in order to free humanity. On the other hand, however, he can only achieve that success by virtue of his own status as a cybernetic posthuman, who is as much dependent on technology and computer software as the machines. Nevertheless, Bartlett and Byers insist that Neo is presented as “a unique, embodied, and romantically/erotically loved subject,” and thus, the film clearly “asserts the triumph of one form of traditional humanist subjectivity over the posthuman” (Bartlett and Byers, 36).

In order to underline their proposition, Bartlett and Byers draw attention to the scene, in which Morpheus explains to Neo why he has the “gift” to defeat the AI’s agents, who are guarding the Matrix. Morpheus reveals to Neo that no one before him has ever managed to kill and destroy an agent—but where others have failed, Neo shall succeed. The crucial thing for Neo to understand is that the rules of the Matrix are, in fact, not any different than the rules and regulations of a computer system – as Morpheus puts it, “some of them can be bent [and] others can be broken” (Wachowski, 48). Neo has the unique capacity to transcend and defy the laws of pre-set structures, unlike the agents who are subjected to the rules the Matrix has imposed on humanity; hence, this is the pivotal difference between the AI’s agents and the “One.” As Morpheus further explains to Neo, he has even “seen an agent punch through a concrete wall. Men have emptied entire clips at them and hit nothing but air. Yet their strength and their speed are still built on rules. Because of that, they will never be as strong or as fast as you can be” (Wachowski, 63).

According to such a view, the machines seemed to have made a fatal mistake in underestimating the capabilities of a superior human consciousness. Morpheus' magic formula for Neo's success is exceptionally simple and straightforward—all he has to do, in order to succeed, is to “free [his] mind” and let go of “fear, doubt, and disbelief” (Wachowski, 57). If Neo liberates his mind, no Cartesian evil demon will be able to deceive him anymore, and he will become virtually invincible.

Understandably, Bartlett and Byers are very critical of such, as they would say, stilted dialogues. They consider them obvious proof of their argument that *The Matrix* is profoundly grounded in a liberal humanist conception of subjectivity. For them, Neo's special “gift,” which sets him apart from the machines, is “natural and organic, not artificial and instrumental, and it is finally grounded not in rational intelligence but in mystical intuition” (Bartlett and Byers, 37). The film seems to suggest that Neo's inherently or essentially human attributes, rather than his posthuman or cyborg characteristics, are what make him special and turn him into the “One.” Bartlett and Byers cite Morpheus once again to support that claim. For a long time, Morpheus admits, he has been looking for Neo and observing him inside the Matrix. Eventually, he was convinced that what Neo could do inside a computer was not “normal,” but rather “magical.” Therefore, Morpheus concluded that Neo's accomplishments must be the result of his status as the “One” who can fly in the face of logic and triumph over the AI (cf. Wachowski, 21). There is little doubt for Bartlett and Byers that “Neo is an icon of neo-Romanticism, and the film's ideology turns out to be a version of ‘natural supernaturalism,’ in which the superiority of human nature to artifice, and of humanist to posthumanist subjectivity, is guaranteed” (Bartlett and Byers, 37).

Therefore, Neo's position as the hero is clearly at odds with the notion of a posthuman system, “wherein the human is but one of a number of equally valid and substitutable sites for consciousness” (Bartlett and Byers, 39). Hence, if Neo's heroic tale is a story of salvation, then the film can hardly be said to represent a postmodern posthumanism that agrees with Haraway's cyborg-theory. They point out that Haraway clearly rejects all-encompassing theories and grand narratives (cf. Bartlett and Byers, 39). Haraway states that the “cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history” (Haraway, 150),

which is in accordance with Lyotard's position that defines the "postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, xxiv). Neo's fight for total freedom rather resembles what Jean-François Lyotard has described as "the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end—universal peace" (Lyotard, xxiv). This is the kind of grand narrative that Lyotard terms *modern*, such as the liberal humanist metadiscourse that legitimates "the emancipation of the rational or working subject" (Lyotard, xxiii). It seems that Bartlett and Byers safely drove their point home, and that *The Matrix* indeed rejects posthuman subjectivity in favor of the liberal humanist view of a stable, unified, rational subject—however, this is not where the story ends.

1.3.3. The Posthuman Hero – "He's a machine"¹⁰

As we have seen, there are a number of hints that imply Neo's status as the "apotheosis" or "epitome" of humanist subjectivity. However, a closer look also reveals his considerable reliance on cybernetic enhancements, in order to fulfill his role as the "One." In a reaction to Bartlett and Byers, Gray Kochhar-Lindgren argues in his article, "Biomorph: The Posthuman Thing," that we should be more careful "before making a final judgment" about Neo, and labeling him as a "neo-Romantic, neo-liberal, neo-humanist subject" (Kochhar-Lindgren, 145). Even though we learn from Tank, who is the operator on Morpheus' ship, that there is a last human resort – a city called Zion, "deep underground, near the earth's core" (Wachowski, 45) – we do not get see it in the film. Tank explains that in Zion human beings are still born, rather than "grown" in Matrix-pods, as Morpheus revealed to Neo. It should also be noted that the "One," who is destined to save humanity, was not born in Zion but was given birth by the machines.

If we look at Neo's body after he is unplugged and freed from the Matrix, we can rightly identify him as a "hybrid of machine and organism" (Haraway, 149). The plug in the back of his head, in particular, is of paramount importance, for it will later enable him to re-enter the Matrix. Tank and his brother Dozer, who were born in Zion, consequently lack the special interfaces to jack into the neural-interactive simulation of the Matrix. At first,

¹⁰ Cf. Wachowski, 47.

Neo seems to be rather shocked and repulsed, as he becomes aware of the implants that scar his whole body. He is so overwhelmed by this “truth” that he breaks down and has to vomit – his own body seemingly revolting against his hybrid-existence. Bartlett and Byers even compare Neo to “Frankenstein’s monster touching the sprockets on the sides of his head and realizing that he is not human” (Bartlett and Byers, 41). It is hard for Neo to come to terms with the fact that he is not a “[one] hundred percent pure old-fashioned home-grown human,” like the operator Tank, who is extremely proud of his unaltered humanness (Wachowski, 45). Bartlett and Byers feel that Tank’s proclamation about the purity of his human origins “are not surprising in a film that seems to want to police the nature/artifice boundary that biotechnology puts into question” (Bartlett and Byers, 41).

Such a negative reading of the film seems justified, were it not for a number of scenes that point to a different interpretation of posthuman bodies in *The Matrix*. In his more positive analysis, Gray Kochhar-Lindgren argues that the epic battle presented in the film is between human and machine, animate and inanimate, and in a wider sense, between person and thing (cf. Kochhar-Lindgren, 141). After offering the reader an abbreviated history of the “person” and the “thing,” he concludes that “there is no such thing as a thing and there is no such thing as a person” (Kochhar-Lindgren, 152). His point is that in a posthuman era, there is simply no place for such fixed sets of binaries, because for the posthuman “all things are mutable,” and therefore a thing “cannot remain a thing [and] the person is being swept along in the digital storm into a new form of being” (Kochhar-Lindgren, 152). As shown in the posthuman world of *The Matrix*, human and machine increasingly become “an ever more complicated symbiotic system of exchanges,” which actually allows for the existence of “multiple points of contact, overlaps, and interfaces” (Kochhar-Lindgren, 153).

Indeed, the fact that “the thing-world and the person-world are bound together irrevocably,” becomes clear when Morpheus and Neo first meet (Kochhar-Lindgren, 154). Morpheus explains why he observed Neo and set him apart from other hackers. Morpheus implies that Neo is not using his computer as a tool, but treats it as if it were part of himself. This should not simply be interpreted as a compliment to flatter Neo’s already inflated hacker-

ego. We should rather recall Hayles' definition of the cyborg as an organism that is configured to such extent, "so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (Hayles, 3). In view of this definition, Neo seems to be the perfect exponent of Hayles' cyborg, rather than a version of Frankenstein's monster. Moreover, Bruce Sterling, one of the most prolific writers of the cyberpunk genre, has described cyberpunk as "post-humanist" science-fiction, because its proponents believe that the "technological destruction of the human condition leads not to futureshocked zombies but to hopeful monsters" (Sterling, quoted in Hollinger, 31).

Nevertheless, Bartlett and Byers argue that Sterling's hopeful monsters "are not really offered as a possibility," throughout the movie (Bartlett and Byers, 42), even though Morpheus emphasizes Neo's ability to become one with his computer as the crucial characteristic which marks him as the "One." The computer is described as literally being a part of Neo, an almost "natural" extension of his body, which is clearly a characteristic that Hayles typically defines as posthuman; hence, she states that "the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born" (Hayles, 3).

Moreover, as early as 1964, Marshall McLuhan prophesied "the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness" (McLuhan, 3). Even before the Wachowski brothers were born, McLuhan had foreseen the transformation of humanity into an information-dependent and computer-addicted species. "Whether the extension of consciousness...will be a 'good' thing," McLuhan wrote, "is a question that admits of a wide solution" (McLuhan, 4). If we apply this question to *The Matrix*, it appears that Neo wants to reject his visible "extensions," as he hesitantly and anxiously explores his "real" body on the *Nebuchadnezzar*. As previously mentioned, Neo appears unwilling to accept the fact that he is not a "naturally" conceived human being and he even seems to envy Tank, who was born in Zion. However, only when Neo learns more about the seemingly endless possibilities of his cyborg-body, he comes to accept his extensions as a "good" thing, indeed.

After his body has recovered from the strenuous procedures of rescuing him from the AI's power plant, Neo is ready to enter the so-called "training-phase." The training-programs are supposed to prepare Neo for the big showdown with the AI's Agents over humanity's future. The training, however, simply requires Neo to sit still, while he is wired into a chair and receiving information that is downloaded directly into his brain. At the beginning, Neo is quite skeptical, but once the first "dose" of martial arts-software hits his brain, he keeps asking for more. When Morpheus comes to inform himself about Neo's training-progress, it turns out to be quite exceptional. Tank, who was monitoring the process, is full of awe, as he tells Morpheus that Neo has been wired to his chair for "ten hours straight. He's a machine" (Wachowski, 47). In fact, it turns out that the attributes that make Neo special are "precisely his posthuman, cybernetic, information-machine-like qualities" (Bartlett and Byers, 42). Not only is he more capable of fighting the AI than a "regular" human being, but his abilities also exceed those of his fellow cyborg-friends, such as Morpheus and Trinity, because Neo resembles a *machine* much more than they do. At this point, the claim that the film clearly favors one kind of subject-position seems to be losing credibility.

Particularly during the final battle between Neo and the AI's most dangerous sentient program, Agent Smith, it becomes obvious that Neo can only beat Smith, if he learns to look at the Matrix as a computer code. Finally, by realizing that he is the "One," Neo does not accept the Matrix as a given reality anymore, but only perceives the world as green digits on black background. Suddenly, he is capable of manipulating the code and even surpasses Smith's capacity to operate and move within the Matrix. Neo had to understand that, for him as the "One," there could not be a fundamental distinction between the "real" world and the neural-interactive simulation of the Matrix. Katherine Hayles also argues that

as long as the human subject is envisioned as an autonomous self with unambiguous boundaries, the human-computer interface can only be parsed as a division between the solidity of real life on the one side and the illusion of virtual reality on the other. (Hayles, 290)

Hence, only if Neo transcends these boundaries without remorse or fear, he can become fully posthuman and make use of his newly gained abilities.

However, if we regard Neo and Smith as both being examples of –more or less developed- posthuman subjects, then their only difference is that Neo represents the “good” guy, whereas Smith is clearly the “bad” one. This would simply be an example of the good-versus-evil dualism, which a typical anti-humanist cyberpunk-story, for instance, would seek to destroy and subvert. So, on the one side, there is the “evil” Smith, who clearly prefers the disembodied virtual reality of the Matrix. The Agent openly despises the human race and radically rejects the material real and the “illusion” of the body. On the other end, there is the hero, Neo, who represents the “good” posthuman, because he is endowed with precisely those characteristics that emphasize his close bond with the “pure, home-grown” humans from Zion. This is exactly what prompts Hayles’ worst anxiety in *How We Became Posthuman*, namely that the concept of the posthuman might easily be re-appropriated by liberal humanism. Therefore, Hayles insists that “serious consideration needs to be given to how certain characteristics associated with the liberal subject, especially agency and choice, can be articulated within a posthuman context” (Hayles, 5).

Following Hayles’ critical position, Bartlett and Byers argue that Neo’s cyborg-self has simply been endowed with liberal humanist traits, in order to justify his victory over Smith as a unified humanist subject’s success. Consequently, that fact would disenfranchise him, as it were, to be a spokesman for a generation of self-confident posthuman cyborgs, as envisioned by Donna Haraway, for instance (cf. Bartlett and Byers, 42). Furthermore, after Neo has defeated – and seemingly destroyed – Agent Smith, he does not proceed immediately to bring about the promised annihilation of the Matrix. On the contrary, the final scene shows Neo in a phone booth, jacked back into the Matrix, from where he addresses the AI. We can see that Neo has finally realized and accepted his role as the “One.” Bartlett and Byers perceive Neo’s final speech as a “rallying cry to us as subjects who may wish to follow the path of liberation that [he] has blazed” (Bartlett and Byers, 43). In his monologue, Neo declares that he is going to bring change, and he says,

I’m going to show these people what you don’t want them to see. I’m going to show them a world without you, a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, a world where

anything is possible. Where we go from here is a choice I leave to you. (*The Matrix*, 2:03:00)

In the end, Neo does not reject his role as the “One,” he rather appears to embrace “precisely the sort of boundless, disembodied subjectivity that the text seemed to be repudiating” (Bartlett and Byers, 42). He feels confident in his role of disembodied virtual resistance fighter. He leads a battle that unfolds while he is, in fact, seated in a chair, “both cybernetic and amazingly passive” (Bartlett and Byers, 42). Therefore, Bartlett and Byers argue that Neo actually rejects Morpheus’ old-fashioned, and perhaps naïve, belief that the Matrix needs to be destroyed, in order for humanity to be free. In fact, Neo’s return to the Matrix implies that human liberation does not need that type of radical change. Instead, “it requires only self-actualization and an assertion of autonomy—the very defining characteristics of the liberal humanist ‘self’” (Bartlett and Byers, 44).

Finally, it becomes clear that Bartlett and Byers do not see any room for a resistant reading of *The Matrix*, as they conclude their very critical article by stating that Neo’s message of resistance is “disturbingly close” to the very system he wants to subvert (Bartlett and Byers, 44). For the two critics, the film suggests that

our utilization of the technology is our pathway to freedom. Neo’s realization that he doesn’t need to change the system, but only learn to make it work for him, invokes the oldest of capitalist myths and once again exposes the complicity of liberal-humanism with capitalism. (Bartlett and Byers, 44)

There is, however, a possibly resistant reading of *The Matrix*, if we consider questions of gender relations—an aspect that Laura Bartlett and Thomas Byers simply ignored in their quite authoritative analysis of the Wachowski brothers’ movie.

1.4. *The Matrix* and “the growing scandal of gender”¹¹

Our understanding of the basic spiritual and psychological archetype of human life has been limited by the assumption that the hero and central character of the myth is male. The journey of the upper-class white male is identified as the generic type for the normal human condition; and other members of society—racial minorities, the poor, and women—are seen as secondary characters, important only as obstacles, aids, or rewards in his journey.

—C. Pearson and K. Pope¹²

As has been noted in one of the previous sections, *The Matrix* has been said to misrepresent cyberpunk’s strong anti-humanist stance. However, when it comes to questions of gender and sexuality, *The Matrix* seems to follow the genre’s “valorization of the (usually male) loner rebel/hacker/punk who appears so frequently as its central character” (Hollinger, 31). Veronica Hollinger has noted with some irony that cyberpunk is “written for the most part by a small number of white middle-class men, many of whom, inexplicably, live in Texas” (Hollinger, 33). Even though it is a well-known fact that the Wachowski brothers are Chicago natives, the “male, white, middle-class” pattern seems to be repeating itself, if we look at the *Matrix*’s hero. Martina Lipp suggests that the stereotypical white, male hero virtually guarantees success, because it can be safely assumed that “the larger majority of the action/science fiction audience is still male” (Lipp, 23). The reception of a “heroic-female messiah figure” (Lipp, 15), on the other hand, is not easy to divine, and therefore a possibly risky undertaking.¹³

Most of the criticism about *The Matrix* written by male commentators tends to tacitly ignore the fact that the “One” is neither a woman (Trinity), nor a black man (Morpheus)¹⁴—it is taken for granted that Neo is playing the role of the “One,” and no one else. The critics seem to consider it a “truth universally acknowledged” that the film’s hero is a white male hacker, as is

¹¹ Cf. Haraway, 178.

¹² Cf. *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*, 4.

¹³ Lipp does acknowledge, however, Lara Croft’s success, for instance, who is both a heroic character and sex-symbol in the equally male-dominated computer-game universe. In any case, Lipp rejects her as an example of an emancipated female hero, since she sees Lara Croft primarily as ‘a result of [male] pornographic fantasy rather than based on real-life images’ (Lipp, 22).

¹⁴ A detailed discussion of race is beyond the scope of the underlying thesis. See Lavender, “Technicity: AI and Cyborg Ethnicity in *The Matrix*,” for a thorough analysis of race and ethnicity in the film, 437-458.

so often the case in cyberpunk narratives (cf. Hollinger, 33). However, even Bruce Sterling is slightly disturbed by the genre's tendency for equating the (male) hero with the concept of the *Übermensch*, which prompted his remark that cyberpunk's "truly dangerous element is incipient Nietzschean philosophical fascism" (Sterling, quoted in Hollinger, 31). At the same time, many critics have pointed out that "a spectacular discourse of the body in cyberpunk is conspicuous and remarkable" (Bukatman, 296). In contrast, there are also critical voices who argue that "the disembodied posthuman subject in cyberspace nevertheless retained its unitary [male] identity" (Wolmark, 77), even though cyberspace has been described as a "new and decentered spatiality" (Bukatman, 45). It seems that a new approach is needed to analyze a text like *The Matrix* from both an anti-humanist, as well as a non-sexist perspective.

In her article, "Staying with the Body: Narratives of the Posthuman in Contemporary Science Fiction," Jenny Wolmark addresses questions regarding the representation of gender in *The Matrix* and challenges notions of unitary identity. Wolmark argues that a "queered feminist reading" of *The Matrix* reveals that the destabilized boundaries between human and machine lead to a redefinition of ambiguity and difference as "signifiers of an inclusive posthuman embodiment" (Wolmark, 76). Wolmark's understanding of the term "queer" in this context is that it questions "the limits imposed by 'proper' gender identification" (Wolmark, 79). Such a reading of the film also attacks cyberpunk's failure to destabilize and subvert normative gender roles. Wolmark argues that such a critical theoretical framework "might also facilitate alternative ways of thinking and writing about gender, difference and the construction of the posthuman body" (Wolmark, 80). Hence, Wolmark follows Haraway's feminist agenda and sees posthuman bodies, especially those represented in *The Matrix*, as having precisely that kind of potential to persistently destabilize the boundaries of gender identification (cf. Wolmark, 80).

1.4.1. “Bodies are not what they seem”¹⁵

Jenny Wolmark’s central thesis in her article is that the “strangely embodied” posthuman subjects in *The Matrix* are “no longer sustained by the idea of a fixed and unified self” (Wolmark, 78). On the contrary, those posthuman bodies seem to be characterized by instability, which, in turn, opens up an opportunity for destabilizing what Judith Butler calls “the matrix of gender relations” (Butler, 7). Butler argues that this matrix establishes the framework within which subjects are gendered. The imposition of regulatory gender norms has a coercive aspect, because those very norms

contribute to that field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as “the human.” We see this most clearly in the examples of those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered; it is their very humanness that comes into question. (Butler, 8)

As Wolmark points out, in *The Matrix* “all humans are constituted as marginal, abject beings that are categorized as monstrous by the AI” (Wolmark, 83). We need only recall Agent Smith’s repulsion at the thought of the human race—he vigorously rejects embodied human being, and compares humanity to a virus, or a plague, for which artificial intelligence and simulation is the only cure (cf. Wachowski, 102). Smith is even tired of patrolling the gates of the Matrix, because it implies being around humans, albeit only simulations of humans. Wolmark argues that it is precisely this movement between the seemingly real world and the simulated world of the Matrix, which enables the constant questioning of the “limits and definitions of ‘proper’ bodies” (Wolmark, 83).

Furthermore, Wolmark makes a crucial observation with regard to the film’s storyline, which is neglected by other critics; hence, she points out that the

frame of reference that is established by the narrative, in which the human is defined as monstrous, ultimately subverts the film’s attempts either to reinvent the human in normative terms...or to reinscribe cultural narratives of gender. (Wolmark, 83)

For Wolmark, it is remarkable that Morpheus’ crew, “a small group of aberrant humans,” who becomes the main focus of the narrative action (Wolmark, 84). She goes on to argue that *The Matrix* offers a narrative space, within which “definitions of gender identity are treated with a certain

¹⁵ Cf. Wolmark, 80.

amount of ironic playfulness” (Wolmark, 84). Here, Wolmark refers to the decision to cast Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Anne Moss for the roles of Neo and Trinity. It has been noted that Reeves lacks the “spectacular body” of a typical action hero “made in Hollywood.” Instead of fascinating the audience with a muscular body, more attention has been paid to emphasizing his androgynous features (cf. Wolmark, 84). Consequently, Reeves/Neo has come to be characterized as a new type of “sexy action hero” (Lipp, 22).

Both Wolmark and Lipp point out that Neo’s outward appearance, especially when jacked into the Matrix, is clearly at odds with the exaggerated constructions of masculinity in typical blockbuster productions. This is an unconventional move, if we consider that the Wachowskis used to work as writers for comics—a genre which is “strongly shaped by exaggerated representations of gender” (Lipp, 22). Hence, it is surprising that the Wachowskis deprive Neo of stereotypical action-hero features, such as a muscular body and exceptional physical strength. Instead, he is presented as a character with a potentially ambiguous gender identity. At this point, it should be noted that Neo is constantly compared to two well-known female literary characters—Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* and Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, who are both little girls in those stories. Indeed, in the film Neo is even described as being “cute” and having “big pretty eyes,” which is certainly not how one would refer to a macho-male action hero.

At the beginning of the film, Neo is told to follow a white rabbit, and later Morpheus draws an explicit parallel between Neo and Alice. In another scene, it is Cypher who compares Neo to Dorothy, telling him to “buckle up, Dorothy, because Kansas is going bye-bye” (Wachowski, 31). These comments could be dismissed as jokes, meant to cheer up the audience during an otherwise rather grim narrative, were they not part of an obvious pattern that contributes to undermining Neo’s masculinity—or rather, his manliness—throughout the movie. Apart from his comparatively slight figure—“in contrast to more beefy colleagues such as Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Terminator trilogy” (Lipp, 23)—it is the manner in which Neo is first presented to the audience that immediately establishes him as a highly ambivalent character. Jenny Wolmark highlights the fact that “Neo is introduced to by a soft focus close-up that emphasizes the androgynous

attraction of Reeves' face" (Wolmark, 84). Furthermore, she points out that, throughout the movie, Neo remains rather unconvincing in his part as the brave hero, because "this role is played out against the initial framework for his character established at the beginning of the film" (Wolmark, 84).¹⁶

Whereas Neo is presented as lacking certain traits that are associated with a tough fighter, Wolmark argues that this role is "more overtly taken by the female character Trinity" (Wolmark, 84). Moreover, while Neo is introduced in a rather passive role, sleeping next to his computer, Trinity is established as the actual action hero in the film's spectacular opening sequence. She is stuck in a hotel room, while at least a dozen policemen are chasing her. When Agent Smith arrives at the scene to capture Trinity, the Lieutenant tells him to let the police to their job, saying condescendingly, "I think we can handle one little girl" (Wachowski, 3). What the Lieutenant obviously does not know is that Trinity is "certainly not your ordinary next-door neighbor," but much closer to "an almost superhuman creature, able to fight and bear pain unimaginable to the average human being" (Lipp, 21). The critic Stacy Gillis, for instance, describes Trinity as a cyberpunk *femme fatale*, an unknown "sexy chick who can kick ass but whose sexuality is dangerous" (Gillis, 77); Geller calls Trinity a "tough chick, [who] refuses gender expectations" (Geller, 7).

The audience immediately witnesses Trinity's superhuman powers, as she defeats one policeman after the other in a truly admirable fashion. Wolmark suggests that Trinity's initial appearance already heavily "problematizes the performative aspects of gender identity" (Wolmark, 84). Trinity assumes the role of the female hero and the film refuses "to stigmatize the ways the 'tough chick' deviates from normative gender roles" (Geller, 7), even though an androgynous female character in a mainstream film is very likely to be portrayed in negative terms. It is clear that Trinity does not resemble the gender-specific "heroine," who is "most often praised for her dedication to

¹⁶ It is indeed peculiar that Neo refuses to accept his role as the "One," and keeps looking for hints that might prove Morpheus' belief in him wrong. After Neo fails his crucial first jump during the training-phase, he thinks that he cannot possibly be the chosen "One," since he is not capable of defying gravity in the Matrix right away. Particularly after his visit at the Oracle's apartment, he is convinced that he is not the "One," for she does not give him a definitely positive reply.

traditional feminine qualities. She is pure, gentle, generous, quiet, stoic in the face of adversity and responsive to her role as mother and wife" (Dilley, 141).

In her influential book *Spectacular Bodies*, Yvonne Tasker also points out that women in Hollywood films are more likely "to be fought over rather than fight, avenged rather than avenge" (Tasker, 17). Trinity's character definitely seems to break with these conventions. The question remains, however, whether she has simply been endowed with attributes typically associated with male action-heroes, in order to appear as a "tough chick." Lipp rejects such a view, arguing that Trinity is not portrayed as a "female version" of a man, and that she is not simply "continuing patriarchal law and behavior instead of developing alternative models of living" (Lipp, 27). Likewise, Jenny Wolmark argues that both Neo and Trinity are "knowingly presented" as challenging and defamiliarizing "cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity" (Wolmark, 84). Stacy Gillis cites Wolmark approvingly, and points out that the gender ambiguity in the film is further "played up by ephebic facial features of both Trinity and Neo who – at least when in the Matrix – look remarkably alike" (Gillis, 80).

Moreover, Gillis writes that *The Matrix* "articulates a notion of potentially powerful female agency" (Gillis, 80), which is not necessarily subordinated to male agency. This is also indicated during the scene when Neo and Trinity first meet. We see that Trinity has managed to lure Neo to an underground club, where she introduces herself as that infamous hacker, who is notorious for having cracked the IRS database a long time ago. Suddenly, Neo is flabbergasted and "a little embarrassed," as he simply stammers, "I just thought...you were a guy," to which Trinity drily responds that "most guys do" (Wachowski, 9). Once again, Trinity's response underlines the "ironic playfulness" with which the Wachowskis treat gender identities in *The Matrix*. Gillis also argues that this particular dialogue between Trinity and Neo highlights the "tensions surrounding the (masculine) strength of the female hero" (Gillis, 80).

Lipp, on the contrary, does not categorize Trinity as an ambiguous female hero, but describes her as hypersexualized. Lipp supports her argument by pointing out that the leather outfit Trinity wears in the Matrix is "usually associated with the glitzy glamour involved in sado-masochism circles" (Lipp,

21). Both Gillis and Wolmark disagree with such a view, for it would simply put Trinity in a similar category with other seemingly powerful women, such as *Wonder Woman*, whose images primarily “stress their femininity and their sexuality” (Gillis, 80). Instead, Trinity is seen as an androgynous character, who does not necessarily attract attention with her bodily features. She rather resembles those representations of powerful female heroes, such as Ellen Ripley in *Alien* (1979) or Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* (1991), who are not simply passive damsels in distress, waiting for men to come to their rescue, but are active fighters themselves (cf. Gillis, 80).

Stacy Gillis argues vigorously that Trinity’s character tries to escape the “matrix of gender relations,” which is, in fact, implied by her above-mentioned highly suggestive attire. Gillis emphasizes that Trinity’s clothes are by no means “hypersexual,” since they do not “accentuate and sexualize revealed skin” (Gillis, 79). Gillis also disagrees with Street, who argues that Trinity’s “black shiny suits suggest a sexual, androgynous look which unsettles her more conveniently feminine persona on the ship” (Street, 96). Street clearly positions Trinity as fetishized, because in a Freudian reading, “her clothes are fetishistic, serving to allay male fears of castration in their sexual, phallic appearance” (Street, 96). By contrast, Gillis insists that Trinity’s clothing is by no means overtly sexualizing, for she needs clothes that are functional and in which she can fight. Hence, her clothes do not “reveal but contain her body” (Gillis, 79), and most importantly, as she is always dressed in black, the gaze is not allowed to penetrate at any given moment in the movie. In fact, at the very beginning, Trinity is presented as the one who has fixed her gaze upon Neo, and apparently enjoys observing him. As Cypher remarks at some point, “you like him, don’t you? You like watching him” (Wachowski, 1). Hence, it is Trinity who is in control and who “becomes the screen figure of identification for the desiring gaze of the female spectator” (Lipp, 24).

Furthermore, Trinity’s remarkably self-confident use of weapons and her breath-taking fighting skills in the Matrix are no less impressive than Neo’s, for instance. If we also recall her status as being a notorious super-hacker herself, then her character is “potentially highly transgressive,” as Stacy Gillis points out (Gillis, 80). Moreover, in *Spectacular Bodies*, Yvonne Tasker has argued that “cinematic images of women who wield guns, and who take

control of cars, computers and the other technologies that have symbolized power and freedom within Hollywood's world, mobilize a symbolically transgressive iconography" (Tasker, 132). Trinity's role as an "emancipated" computer-hacker would also indicate that the Wachowskis were well aware of cyberpunk's sexism, which clearly favors the image of the dominant male hacker. It seems that with Trinity's character they tried to challenge the genre's prevalent stereotypes. Lipp agrees with such a view and emphasizes that "the use of technology and weapons can certainly have a liberating and empowering effect" for women (Lipp, 27).

However, despite all these similarities between Neo and Trinity, there is still "one major difference" between them, as Lipp puts it, "he is the chosen one and destined to save the world, and well, she is not" (Lipp, 14). Interestingly enough, Trinity is initially a powerful figure—if not the most powerful in certain instances—for she saves Neo's life twice. Let us call that scene to mind, during which Neo and Trinity are on their mission to save Morpheus. When Neo runs out of ammunition and is "confronted by a gun-toting Agent...it is Neo who calls Trinity for help" (Gillis, 80). In a "true" action-hero manner, Trinity is immediately there and saves Neo from being shot. She is quick enough to eliminate the Agent and famously exclaims, "dogde this," while pulling the trigger (Wachowski, 104).

Moreover, at the end of *The Matrix*, Neo is fighting against Agent Smith and seemingly losing the fight. Eventually Smith fires a dozen bullets at him and kills Neo. What some critics have described as the "weakest moment of the script," is the part when Trinity brings Neo back to life, by telling him that she loves him. The point is, of course, that the Oracle has prophesied Trinity that she would fall in love with the man who is the "One." Therefore, Trinity whispers to Neo that he cannot be dead, because she loves him (cf. Wachowski, 127). In a scene reminiscent of the famous fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*, Trinity leans in to "wake" Neo with a kiss, "believing in all her heart that he will feel her lips and know that they speak the truth" (Wachowski, 122). Again, the Wachowskis are playing with the characters' gender roles, since every child knows that it is the brave and handsome prince who saves the (female) sleeping beauty. Shortly before the moment of his greatest triumph – coming back to life, assuming the role of the "One," and defeating

Agent Smith – Neo is likened to a female figure. His presumed role as tough male action-hero is constantly destabilized until the very end. Whereas Trinity enacts the role of the male hero – as in the fairy tale – it is suggested that she is more active, more assertive in her agency than Neo, who is ultimately dependent on Trinity to confirm him as the “One.”

It can be safely assumed that Neo would have died, had she not saved him in both those critical moments. As a result, we could argue that she held the key to the beginning of the revolution, to the coming of the “One,” and the defeat of the machines. However, her transgressive role as a female hacker is increasingly displaced “by her ‘real’ job,” as Gillis argues, namely that of “taking care of Neo so that he can do his work of being the ‘One’” (Gillis, 80), which is presented as the greatest achievement of human –or rather, male–agency. Lipp also concludes with disappointment that no matter how positive Trinity’s role might have been, “there is always some man above placed above [her] in importance” (Lipp, 29). Most feminist critics of the movie have pointed out that Trinity might have possessed the biggest potential to disrupt the patriarchal structures in *The Matrix*, but her role was consistently weakened, as the narrative progressed, and she kept losing power.

Another critical issue, from a feminist point of view, is the analysis of heterosexual desire in *The Matrix*, which further undermines female empowerment by the use of certain narrative methods. Lipp, for instance, criticizes the Wachowski brothers for drawing on established gender role models, when it comes to the depiction of “general human interaction” (Lipp, 25). She argues that the authors of *The Matrix* heavily rely on traditional narrative devices, such as heterosexual romance between the protagonists, simply in order to “tone down the significance of the female character” (Lipp, 29). Moreover, Trinity’s role as Neo’s partner also serves to confirm the heterosexuality of the hero, while the female character in the narrative, as so often, only “operates as some kind of symbolic guarantee, a place for the fixing of difference and heterosexual desire” (Tasker, 16).

Wolmark goes a step further and suggests that the romance between Neo and Trinity is simply averting the attention from Morpheus’ peculiar relationship to Neo. In a daring proposition, she actually suggests that Trinity’s attraction to Neo is merely a “plot device,” whereas the “narrative

attention remains almost entirely focused on the intense desire for Neo that is expressed by Morpheus” (Wolmark, 84). Morpheus is presented as someone whose beliefs cannot be shattered, because his convictions are firmly grounded in a – suspicious – form of mysticism. The Oracle prophesied that he would eventually find the “One,” and Morpheus fanatically believes that Neo is that man he was looking for. However, the narrative “consistently denies the possibilities of this reference,” and therefore “its meaning can instead be attached to desire” (Wolmark, 84). For Wolmark, the entire narrative actually “provides a symbolic opportunity for both the realization and reciprocation of desire” (Wolmark, 84).

She goes on to argue that Neo already accepts his role as the “One,” when he decides to rescue Morpheus, who is detained and tortured by the Agent Smith. Neo is ready to risk his life to save him—just as Morpheus sacrificed himself in order for Neo to escape the Agents. Wolmark suggests that Neo’s transformation into the “One” is, in fact, an indication that he has rejected the “normative and regulatory fictions of gender that have been imposed on him by the Matrix” (Wolmark, 84). Neo and Trinity undertake a daring rescue, as they try to release Morpheus, who is kept in a sky scraper. Wolmark reads the moment in which Morpheus jumps out of the building and Neo leaps into the air, in order to catch him, as a demonstration of Neo’s transformed self-awareness. Previously described by the Oracle as being “not too bright,” he is now “both a desired and desiring body,” as he flies towards the falling Morpheus (Wolmark, 85). Unlike the critics Bartlett and Byers, Wolmark perceives Neo’s call at the end of the film in highly positive terms, since Neo’s vision of a world without either “rules or controls” or “borders and boundaries,” clearly “reinforces his transgression of the boundaries of both narrative expectations and gendered normativity” (Wolmark, 85).

In her conclusion, Wolmark argues for the “presence of unpredictable posthuman bodies and emergent and dispersed posthuman subjectivities” (Wolmark, 85). *The Matrix* represents posthuman characters, who are able to move between two –seemingly- distinct worlds, and it is implied that an existence in such a *borderland* is potentially highly transgressive. Their ability to inhabit a fluid rather than a fixed space turns them into particularly

threatening hybrids with the prospect to undermine traditional categories of gender and fixed notions of embodiment. As has been pointed out by many critics, *The Matrix* fails at providing a continuous, radical and far-reaching deconstruction of gender categories, but “it has been partially successful in creating a narrative space within which orthodoxies of gender inscription are at least treated ironically” (Wolmark, 85). Considering that *The Matrix* is a big-budget Warner Bros. production, critics have argued that it offers as much “subversive” potential, as might be expected from a conventional action film—or, as Chad Barnett put it, “[t]o the extent that a Hollywood film can come from the underground, this one did” (Barnett, 362).

Ultimately, the narrative of *The Matrix* offers, as Wolmark concludes, an “open-ended view of what embodied existence on the borders of the real and the virtual might be like. From this perspective, identity can be understood as “provisional, contingent, and, multiple” (Wolmark, 85). In the next chapter, we will have a more detailed look at those borders of the “real” and the “virtual,” when we discuss Baudrillard’s theory of simulation.

2. “Welcome to the Real World”: Baudrillard and *The Matrix*

One of the perpetual pleasures of *The Matrix* lies in the fact that, unlike the majority of what Hollywood puts out, this film does not insult the viewer’s intelligence.

—Read Mercer Schuchardt,
“What is the Matrix?”

The Matrix is not the first science-fiction film to concern itself with philosophical questions, such as the nature of reality, or what it means to be human, especially in a world dominated by computer technology and global capitalism. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons it has come to be known as one of the paragons of the “intellectual” or “philosophical” Hollywood movie. The impact it had on audiences around the world is undeniable. The writer-directors, brothers Andy and Larry Wachowski, inspired fans, critics, and numerous scholars to try and disentangle the web of questions, mysteries, and endless allusions, surrounding *The Matrix*.

Indeed, while watching the story unfold, we find ourselves in precisely the same position as the protagonist, Neo, as he follows the cryptic hints he receives from his computer, which lead him to Trinity – one of the most notorious hackers. They first meet in an ecstatic nightclub environment, and she whispers conspiratorially in his ear, “it’s the question that drives us, the question that brought you here. You know the question just as I did” (Wachowski, 14). The ominous question is, of course, “What is the Matrix?”

There are few science fiction or action films from the Hollywood canon that have incited as much enthusiasm among fans and scholars alike. Apart from *The Matrix*, only *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* are known to have spawned thousands of websites, dozens of scholarly articles, and even college courses. Other science fiction films, such as *The Terminator*, which has a similar plot – machines overpowering humans in the distant future – achieved no such effect and inspired no such fanatic devotion (cf. Gordon, 96). Obviously, *The Matrix* struck a chord with a whole generation of fans and critics. Read Mercer Schuchardt described the film as “a graduate thesis on consciousness in the sheep’s clothing of an action-adventure flick. Whether you’re illiterate or have a Ph.D., there’s something in the movie for you” (Schuchardt, 13). Other critics have argued that the film simply alludes to issues ranging from metaphysics to epistemology, on the grounds that it

belongs to a certain genre, and should therefore not be regarded as a serious attempt at providing the audience with real answers to philosophical questions. Knight and McKnight claim that, “*The Matrix* is unquestionably an example of real genre, but only an instance of virtual philosophy,” since, according to their analysis, it is obvious that “*The Matrix*’s allusions are primarily intended to promote suspense, anxiety, horror, and even terror” (Knight and McKnight, 201).

This kind of criticism leads us directly to one of the most crucial debates centering on *The Matrix*, i.e. its appeal, or non-appeal, to scholars. As mentioned above, there are critical voices that see the movie as devoid of any philosophical or intellectual depth, while there are others who celebrate *The Matrix* as one of the few movies that manage to combine dazzling action-scenes with a sophisticated plot. The Wachowski brothers themselves, clearly aimed at mystifying their audience with a complicated and dense story, but hoped to impress them even more with innovative visual effects that had never been seen before. As Larry Wachowski put it in one of the brothers’ rare interviews, “even if audiences didn’t get all of the references, we knew they’d at least have a good time with the visuals” (Corliss, n.p.).

In 2000, *The Matrix* won four Academy Awards for “Best Visual Effects,” and “Best Sound Effects,” among others. Thus, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences made a clear decision in favor of *The Matrix*. Winning those particular awards, however, seemed to confirm the argument that *The Matrix* should be seen as a mere science-fiction spectacle, dominated by special effects, and nothing else. Read Mercer Schuchardt dismissed such scathing criticism, by writing in his original style that, when it comes to judging *The Matrix*, we must not “let the packaging fool [us]. Because far more than the eye-popping special effects and ear-shredding soundtrack, it is the ideas and the dialogue that dazzle in *The Matrix*” (Schuchardt, 13). Schuchardt is definitely one of the critics, who appreciate the Wachowskis’ attempt at including as many references to philosophy, theology, and cultural theory as possible in a movie, which at first sight appeared to be a prototypical action-blockbuster. William Merrin shares similar views, writing that “[b]eneath this banal, over-financed, action-movie and its ultra-violent cyberchic, there is another reality; another film” (Merrin,

n.p.). He suggests, like Schuchardt, that one needs to dig beneath the surface to find that “other” film. Hence, the question, as to what *The Matrix* is in terms of its philosophical aspirations, still remains open to debate. As there is no Academy Award for “Best Intellectual Film,” it is for the *other* academia to decide, which reading of the film seems most convincing.

Another critic, Andrew Gordon, rightly points out, however, there is no clear-cut distinction to be made, between an “intellectual” action film and one that merely pretends to be sophisticated. Moreover, in the postmodern, “eclecticism rules” (Gordon, 96), as the boundaries between so-called “low” and “high” culture have become more fluid and even obsolete. Larry Wachowski explained in another interview that the brothers’ “main goal with *The Matrix* was to make an intellectual action movie. We were determined to put as many ideas into the movie as we could” (Probst, 32). This is the only thing all critics will agree on – namely, that *The Matrix* is not only an incredible pastiche of Hollywood’s most successful science fiction movies to date, including *2001*, *Star Wars*, *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *The Terminator*, *Total Recall*, and *Men in Black*, to name but a few (cf. Gordon, 94), but also a pastiche of ideas from postmodern critical theory, from Lacan to Baudrillard. As Slavoj Žižek put it, “practically every orientation seems to recognize itself in [*The Matrix*]” (Žižek, “The Matrix,” 241), and he mentions his Lacanian friends who tell him that “the authors must have read Lacan; [or] the Frankfurt School partisans [who] see in *The Matrix* the extrapolated embodiment of *Kulturindustrie*” (Žižek, “The Matrix,” 241).

Is *The Matrix*, as Dino Felluga argues, a “paradigm of post-modernism,” which is, therefore, rightly referred to as an “intellectual action movie,” or is it rather to be filed under “intellectual poseur,” as Andrew Gordon counters in his article? Felluga follows David Weberman’s essay, “*The Matrix* Simulation and the Postmodern Age,” in which Weberman lauds the Wachowskis for their ability to create what he perceives as a thoroughly postmodern film. William Merrin also praises the Wachowskis for raising epistemological issues in their film. All of these critics, Felluga, Merrin, and Weberman, cite the movie’s reference to Jean Baudrillard and his theory on simulation as the crucial element that marks *The Matrix* as postmodern.¹⁷

¹⁷ Apart from Baudrillard, it is important to note that *The Matrix* is also much indebted to

Needless to say, the favorable views have been attacked from various standpoints. Andrew Gordon is one of those critics who claims that the Wachowskis' reference to Baudrillard is misleading, as it is clearly based on a misunderstanding and simplification of his theories. As a result, *The Matrix* does by no means qualify as a serious postmodern reflection and commentary upon our society's condition at the turn of the millennium. Richard Hanley, an analytic philosopher, responds to the debate between Felluga and Gordon, by sympathizing with Gordon's views, and showing nothing but disdain for postmodernism and Baudrillard. Vartan Messier rejects Hanley's attacks on postmodernism, since he seeks to defend Baudrillard's theories against the evils of Hollywood, and calls *The Matrix* a "case of misused references," when it comes to Baudrillard.

From this short overview, it already becomes clear that the debate about postmodernism and Jean Baudrillard's influence on the Wachowskis, is perhaps just as complex and dense as *The Matrix* plot itself. In order to bring light to the matter, it is necessary to go back to Baudrillard and his theory of simulation, in order to show how it is related to our postmodern condition. Moreover, I will point out the instances in the movie, which gave rise to the discussion about Baudrillard and *The Matrix* in the first place. Finally, I will go on to analyze selected articles, which lie at heart of this controversial and still on-going debate. My analysis will center on the debate between Dino Felluga and Andrew Gordon, whose articles cover all the crucial points to be made about Baudrillard and *The Matrix*. Furthermore, I will look at a number of other important contributions to the underlying discussion about the impact of Baudrillard and postmodernist thinking on the film.

novelist William Gibson, who has famously coined the terms "cyberspace" and "the matrix," which describe what the Wachowskis' film is all about, i.e. virtual reality. Gibson portrays cyberspace as a kind of transcendent sphere, a "consensual hallucination." He is also celebrated for having founded the cyberpunk subgenre, and his novel *Neuromancer* (1984) is a hallmark in cyberpunk fiction. In this respect, *The Matrix* has been hailed to have revived cyberpunk for the new millennium, and analogous to Gibson's novel, it was referred to as "the first masterpiece of film c-punk" ("The E-Files," 346).

2.1. *Simulacra and Simulation: The World According To Baudrillard*

This change from human scale to a system of nuclear matrices is visible everywhere: this body, our body, often appears simply superfluous, basically useless in its extension, in the multiplicity and complexity of its organs, its tissue and functions, since today everything is concentrated in the brain and in genetic codes, which also sum up the operational definition of being.

—Jean Baudrillard,
“The Ecstasy of Communication”

It is often mentioned – not without irony, it seems – that Jean Baudrillard was referred to as the “high priest of postmodernism,” and that he enjoyed almost guru-like status among his followers, who took everything he said and wrote for granted. William Merrin feels that, through his inclusion in a Hollywood blockbuster, Baudrillard is “now elevated to the patron saint of a knowledge; a zeitgeist; a complete contemporary experience of the real” (Merrin, n.p.). In that respect, it would not be far-fetched to establish a connection between Baudrillard and Morpheus’ character in the film. So, it is not surprising that it is indeed Morpheus, who quotes Baudrillard in *The Matrix*. Echoing Baudrillard’s words from his essay “The Precession of Simulacra,” Morpheus welcomes Neo to “the desert of the real” (Wachowski, 40), as he presents Neo with the world as it really is at the end of the 22nd century.

Baudrillard himself, refers to the “desert of the real,” when he draws a comparison between the fable “Of Exactitude in Science” from Jorge Luis Borges, and the postmodern condition of our society in the 20th century. In fact, Baudrillard inverts Borges’ fable, which he describes as “the most beautiful allegory of simulation” (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 1), in order to explain how the real in which we live, has become a “hyperreal.” Baudrillard concisely retells Borges’ story of an Empire that ordered the cartographers to draw a map of its territory, in which the map became so accurate in every detail that eventually it covered the entire territory itself. The slow decline of the Empire also “witnesses the fraying of this map, little by little, and its fall into ruins, though some shreds are still discernible in the deserts” (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 1). In the case of this fable, the “charm of abstraction” has not been lost yet, whereas nowadays things have changed radically, and “abstraction is no longer that of the map,...or the concept. It is

the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 1). What has happened is, that the process of abstraction has turned upside down, as it were, and hence Baudrillard's claim that we live in the age of "The Precession of Simulacra," as the title of his essay suggests. Following Borges' fable, it is no longer the territory that comes before the map, quite on the contrary, the map precedes the territory. As Baudrillard explicates, returning to Borges once again, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself* (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 1). The cartographers, he notes, were obsessed with the idea of creating an ideal representation of the territory, because in their world the reality principle was still intact, the difference between map and territory, copy and original, still discernible.

New media forms, however, such as television, have created a new realm through which individuals began to experience reality. The danger lies in the fact that this new "layer of experience" fundamentally undermines "the subject's ability to define and to grasp the truth" (Poster, 45). Baudrillard points out that our modern system of representation ceases to operate successfully, because electronic media brought about a "new mode of signification in which signs are divorced from their referents in the object world" (Poster, 45). It is a new form of representation in which words and images mark their appearance on TV screens, without bearing a firm and clear relation to the real world, "thus functioning not as representations but as objects themselves, as entities whose meaning resides within" (Poster, 45).

What Baudrillard proposed was a fundamental revolution in the structure of language, which goes back to Saussure. Nevertheless, Baudrillard "unsettles thought systems of an earlier epoch" (Poster, 45), and declares the coming of a major cultural change, because we are facing a deep crisis in the relation between reality and the image. The traditional relation between the two was clear-cut, with the image being a more or less accurate copy of the real. This process of representation can obviously only be based on the "principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real" (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 6). Albeit a utopian equivalence, as Baudrillard remarks, it is a fundamental

axiom, according to which representation is said to operate. Simulation, on the other hand, denies the accepted truth that the sign hides an underlying reality (cf. Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 6). Contrary to representation, Baudrillard explains, simulation “stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value*” (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 6). This leads inevitably to a system in which the sign is deprived of its latent meaning, and refers merely to yet another sign.

Baudrillard declares that simulation “envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum,” and describes the successive phases of the image, as following:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever:
it is its own pure simulacrum. (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 6)

What lies at the center of Baudrillard’s concerns, however, is not simply the fact that in our Western culture simulation is already underway, but that this process ultimately leads to the “loss of the real.” The greatest danger lies in the fact that, once simulation takes over, it becomes virtually impossible to tell the difference between the real and the imaginary. In the era of simulation, the vanishing line between reality and concept disappears, because of a lack of stable reference points – “liquidation of all referentials” (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 2). We have moved beyond the realm of imitation or parody, and find ourselves in a situation, in which signs of the real are substituted for the real (cf. Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 2). Whereas with mimesis and representation, there is still the possibility of measuring the success of the simulation against the real itself, we are deprived of doing so, when it comes to the hyperreal. As a consequence, Baudrillard writes, hyperreality does not need to be “rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational” (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 2).

That is a frightening message, for it implies that the hyperreal exists in a sphere beyond good and evil, and is only judged in terms of its performativity (cf. Lane, 86). Hence Baudrillard’s fear of a world without a real origin, in which “all of metaphysics is lost” (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 2), since concepts

such as “truth” or “ethics” are always worth less than those means which improve a system’s performativity. As Richard Lane points out, a world dominated by the hyperreal produces a “society of surfaces, performativity, and a fragmentation of rationality” (Lane, 91) – and that is precisely how many critics would describe the “postmodern” (cf. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 1979).

2.2. Baudrillard enters *The Matrix*

What exactly makes Baudrillard interesting for the Wachowski brothers, and how can his theories be relevant for a Hollywood blockbuster? Although, as John Storey observes, Baudrillard’s presence “has not been confined to the world of the academia,” and his articles and interviews appeared in “many popular magazines” (Storey, 133), it is questionable whether a vast majority of the *Matrix*-fans had ever heard of Baudrillard, before going to the cinema, in order to see *The Matrix*. As William Merrin observes, “[d]espite his on-screen reference, discussion of Baudrillard’s significance for *The Matrix* is rare on web-sites, reviews, and fan-literature” (Merrin, n.p.). Indeed, most viewers have probably overlooked the scene, in which Thomas Anderson/Neo holds a copy of Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* into the camera.

This moment, however, is one of the most crucial scenes for a thorough understanding of the film as a whole. Merrin interprets the inclusion of Baudrillard’s book as “an acknowledgement that his theory of simulation and the simulacrum is, in some way, central to the film” (Merrin, n.p.). Vartan Messier also feels that invoking Baudrillard as a source of authority “appears to be a type of tribute, an homage or reverence” (Messier, n.p.), and James Rovira even goes so far to claim that *Simulacra and Simulation* is such an integral part of the film’s narrative structure, that the film can be described as a deliberate attempt “to validate Baudrillard’s theory” (Rovira, n.p.).

Many critics have also noted a number of peculiarities surrounding the scene that marks Baudrillard’s entry into *The Matrix*. This particular copy of *Simulacra and Simulation*, which we get to see in the movie, is evidently much thicker than the “real” book – but that is not all that strikes the expert as peculiar. When Neo grabs and opens his book, we can see that the chapter “On Nihilism” suddenly appears right in the middle, whereas it is supposed to

be at the very end. The most disappointing thing, however, is the fact that Neo might have never read Baudrillard, since his copy is hollowed out, and simply used as storage for his illegal hacker-software.

The book as object plays no important role in the movie itself, it seems, as it only serves the function of a secret hiding-place, but the implicit message the Wachowskis thus emitted, is subject to heated academic debate.¹⁸ Why refer to the eminent French theorist in such a self-conscious manner? The fact that the copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* was hollowed out has led some critics, who are highly suspicious of postmodernism, to conclude that the Wachowskis obviously aimed at showing their disdain for Baudrillard. Hence, they included his empty, fake book in their movie – empty in every respect, as it were, and not meant to be read at all, but used for other purposes (cf. Hanley, n.p.). Hanley even writes that the apparent hints towards Baudrillard and his work “are playful, ironic references” (Hanley, n.p.). Others, like Gordon, have suggested that the book simply works as more sophisticated plot device, anticipating Neo’s discovery that his whole life takes place in a simulated world (cf. Gordon, 85). If that were indeed the case, then why would the Wachowskis try to contact the Frenchman himself, and ask him to be part of their project?¹⁹ Why would the directors allegedly instruct cast-members to read *Simulacra and Simulation* before the shooting of the film (cf. Gordon, 86), if they had no respect for Baudrillard whatsoever?

The second direct reference to Jean Baudrillard in the movie itself, happens during the famous Construct-sequence. When Morpheus mutters the words “welcome to the desert of the real,” Neo and he are inside the so-called Construct, the loading program the rebels use, in order to plug into the realm of the Matrix. During this sequence, Neo learns that he spent his whole life in a cocoon, kept like an animal in the zoo, and what he perceived and experienced as reality, was nothing but a “neural-interactive simulation” (Wachowski, 40). Then, Morpheus goes on to reveal to Neo what the real

¹⁸ The question, whether the book itself is a “simulacrum,” or not, is also controversial. Middeke and Henke see the hollowed out book as a simulacrum, because it is obviously only a “simulation” of a real book (cf. Middeke and Henke, 12). Kapell and Wilhelm, on the other hand, suggest that Neo’s book is “anything but a simulacrum, being perfectly discernible from other copies” (Kapell and Wilhelm, 132).

¹⁹ Cf. Baudrillard’s interview with the *Nouvel Observateur*, in which he says that he has been contacted by the Wachowskis’ staff, in order to “get [him] involved in the following [episodes]” (Lancelin, n.p.), but he declined the offer.

world “really” looks like. Chicago, as Neo remembers it from his simulated life, does not exist anymore. At the end of the 22nd century, it is a city reduced to ruins, the aftermath of a nuclear war clearly visible: the skies have grown dark, no humans on the streets – a deserted city in more than one way.

Without a doubt, the brothers wanted the audiences to acknowledge that Jean Baudrillard had entered *The Matrix*, but in how far Baudrillard influenced the idea behind the Matrix, is not easy to divine. The film concerns itself with virtual reality, and to a certain extent with simulation of life, as envisaged by Baudrillard. Although, as commentators such as Hanley have remarked, Baudrillard’s work is notoriously difficult to read and at times even abstruse in both language and argument, his influence on postmodernist theory cannot be disavowed. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the Wachowskis would turn to his work, if they wanted their film to be firmly grounded in a sound theoretical framework. As Mark Poster points out, “his notion of simulational culture...captures as no social theorist before him the linguistic gestures and the unique configurations of electronic media as they course through the wired capillaries of the postmodern body social” (Poster, 45). But have the authors of *The Matrix* remained faithful to Baudrillard and his theories, or have they simply tried to envelop their visual effects and action-orgy in a pseudo-intellectual wrapping, to give it a seemingly postmodern chic?

2.3. *The Matrix*: Only intellectual poseur?

Dino Felluga’s contribution to this debate is his article, “The Matrix: Paradigm of Postmodernism or Intellectual Poseur? Part I,” which was published in *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy, and Religion in The Matrix* (2003). His essay is followed by Andrew Gordon’s article, reprinted as a response to Felluga as “Part II,” in the same book. Felluga opens his article by acknowledging that “[f]ew films in the Hollywood canon make as clear a direct reference to postmodern theory as does *The Matrix*” (Felluga 71). Here, he refers to the abovementioned scene that includes the appearance of *Simulacra and Simulation*. Mark Webberman had similar praise for *The Matrix*, because, for him, it is “the most sustained (implicitly) philosophical

film to address one of the central features of postmodern experience” (Weberman, 226). Weberman is, of course, referring to the “blurred or vanishing line between reality and simulation” (Weberman, 226).²⁰ Unlike Weberman, however, Felluga’s agenda is clear and controversial at the same time, since he sets out to show that the authors of *The Matrix* stay faithful to Baudrillard, “even when they appear to contradict him” (Felluga, 72). This is no straightforward undertaking, because there are indeed certain flaws to be detected, when it comes to *The Matrix*’s relationship to Baudrillard.

Some of those flaws are discussed right at the beginning of Gordon’s article, and it immediately becomes clear that his esteem for Baudrillard has its limits. Gordon goes so far as to question Baudrillard’s competency for theorizing the virtual in the first place, since “he has little knowledge of cyberculture,” and his critique of hyperreality came long before “the digital revolution began that brought about the Internet, the PC, and virtual reality” (Gordon, 89). Gordon makes the point that Baudrillard started with criticizing television and advertisements and therefore fails to distinguish between “the effects of television and of the computer” (Gordon, 89).

In his article about Baudrillard’s relationship to virtual reality, Mark Poster emphasizes that virtual reality and computers have radically changed the “process of perception in which the machine has been integrated within the body at a new level of symbiosis” (Poster, 42). Poster also points out that the TV screen needs to be differentiated from the computer screen, because in virtual reality the “subjects and objects interactively/immersively construct cultural spaces and events” (Poster, 50). Hence, Gordon’s rather condescending remark about Baudrillard’s tendency of “[lumping] theme parks, television and virtual reality as forms of simulation” (Gordon, 89).

This criticism of Baudrillard notwithstanding, Gordon concedes that Baudrillard’s central ideas concerning simulation make sense in connection with *The Matrix*, since the movie clearly deals with his vision of a fourth order

²⁰ Kapell and Wilhelm reject Felluga’s and Weberman’s views, because they seem to classify the film as the epitome of the postmodern, simply because “the idea of ‘reality’ is not fully knowable” (Kapell and Wilhelm, 133), and seek to confirm their arguments by citing Jean Baudrillard. “Just because we are not sure that there is something called ‘reality’ outside of our own experiences” (Kapell and Wilhelm, 133), does not necessarily imply that *The Matrix* is a clearly postmodern film. Kapell and Wilhelm suggest that critics, such as Felluga and Weberman, must have a “distorted” opinion about what modernism means (cf. Kapell and Wilhelm, 135).

simulation – the Matrix bearing no relation to reality whatsoever. In his more detailed analysis, Gordon further acknowledges that in his description of hyperreality, Baudrillard even “[seems] to describe the movie” (Gordon, 91).²¹

In his article, Felluga argues that *The Matrix* perfectly exemplifies Baudrillard’s idea, as described in the “Precession” essay, because of the theory’s literal translation to the movie. Felluga writes that “in a quite literal sense...[h]umans have only ever known that map or the model” (Felluga, 75), because they only get to know their culture and reality by means of a simulation program. Humans cannot experience “reality” itself, for it no longer exists in such a shape. Indeed, the Matrix would be the result of taking Baudrillard at his word,

the real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control—and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these... It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 2)

Andrew Gordon rejects that view, since Baudrillard’s “hyperbolic pronouncements” about simulation and hyperreality are by no means supposed to be taken literally (Gordon, 88). Gordon cites critic Csicsery-Ronay, who has nothing but glowing praise for Baudrillard, calling him a “virtuoso stylist of theory-SF” (Csicsery-Ronay, n.p.), in order to explain why Baudrillard’s remarks must be treated with caution and consequently put into perspective. As Csicsery-Ronay further explains, Baudrillard’s theory is best described in terms of “apocalyptic-dystopian-idealist” (Csicsery-Ronay, n.p.). Therefore, Gordon concludes that Baudrillard’s writings should be taken metaphorically instead, “as exaggerations to make a point, as we would the imagined world of George Orwell,” for instance (Gordon, 88). Richard Hanley, the analytic philosopher who sympathizes with Gordon’s views, also writes that it is “better to take [Baudrillard] as presenting a cautionary tale of some sort – that we in some meaningful sense have lost touch with reality” (Hanley, n.p.). For if we interpret Baudrillard literally, Hanley argues, it is highly questionable “why we should believe a word of it” (Hanley, n.p.). Scott Bukatman, however, stresses the importance of Baudrillard’s theories for the

²¹ Despite his little esteem for Baudrillard, Richard Hanley also writes that “there seem to be many connections between Baudrillard’s work and *The Matrix*,” and he admits that Baudrillard’s description of the hyperreal, “even *sounds* like the Matrix” (Hanley, n.p.).

present cultural moment, arguing that this “hyperbolic language, which characterizes the philosophy of Baudrillard...constitutes a new mimesis—it is a language of spectacle and simulation, a language designed to be appropriate to its era” (Bukatman, 11).

The reason, why the Wachowskis felt attracted to Baudrillard is quite obvious for Gordon, as both Baudrillard and the Wachowskis are interested in science fiction in one way or another. Baudrillard writes “theory-SF,” because “he deals in hyperbolic and apocalyptic pronouncements,” while the filmmakers are creating “an apocalyptic, dystopian movie about hyperreality” (Gordon, 89). The problem with Baudrillard and *The Matrix*, hence, is the fact that Morpheus and his companions do have access to the “real” territory, and they are able to switch effortlessly from one place of action to another. Obviously, they can easily discriminate between reality and artifice—which stands in clear contradiction to Baudrillard’s central point that in a hyperreal world we will have lost all ability to differentiate the real and imaginary. Nevertheless, critics such as Felluga propose an answer to the seeming confusion.

2.3.1. Welcome to the Desert of the Real

What is often pointed out, is that a part of Morpheus’ speech during the Construct-scene has been cut from the final version of the film, as we can tell from reading the original shooting script. The scene in the film omits those few lines, in which Morpheus refers to Baudrillard directly, and quotes him in greater detail. As Morpheus explains to Neo what has led to the construction of the Matrix, and why humanity lives enslaved in it, he also tries to describe the nature of the computer simulation to the incredulous Neo. In the original screenplay, Morpheus was supposed to tell Neo that, “as in Baudrillard’s vision, your whole life has been spent inside the map, not the territory. This is the world as it exists today. ‘The desert of the real’” (Wachowski, 40).

Russell Kilbourn, who argues in his article that *The Matrix* is not a “proto-Baudrillardian allegory” (Kilbourn, 1034), suggests that the Wachowskis became aware of a “potential misunderstanding of Baudrillard’s central point from the ‘Precession’ essay” (Kilbourn, 1043), and therefore, they decided to excise this part of Morpheus’ speech from the film. Could it really be that the

Wachowskis misunderstood Baudrillard? In his very critical analysis, Hanley proposes the possibility that the Wachowski brothers were “trying to be faithful to Baudrillard, but relied on a relatively superficial reading of *Simulacra and Simulation*” (Hanley, n.p.).

What would make Morpheus’ original speech problematic is the fact that he suggests an opposition, or choice, between the “map” and the “territory.” As Baudrillard explains in “The Precession of Simulacra,” the fable of the Empire’s map would be simply an example of second order simulacra, but the Wachowskis were aiming at presenting the world according to the hyperreal, and therefore the reference to Baudrillard’s theory of simulation would fail. His crucial idea is that there is nothing else, except for the simulacrum, since there is no “territory” to be invoked, which could be compared to the simulacrum – the hyperreal eclipses any distinction between the real and the imaginary (cf. Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 3).

Felluga is, of course, aware of this contradiction, but he sets out to resolve the apparent confusion, by drawing our attention to the Construct sequence, once again, in order to shed some light on this debate. Quite rightly, he observes that the Wachowskis made interesting decisions in filming this particular, and perhaps most crucial, part of the story. Morpheus does not take Neo directly to the “desert of the real,” in order for Neo to witness it with his own eyes. Instead, Morpheus leads Neo to yet another simulated realm – the Construct – where he chooses to speak to him about the real world. What is even more peculiar, however, is the fact that Neo, as well as the viewers, access the “real” through an old-fashioned TV-set, which was loaded into the Construct.

As a matter of fact, we see Morpheus and Neo seated in big, red armchairs, watching a TV-documentation about the destruction of what used to be the real world. Hence, Felluga questions this separation between the real world and its simulation by emphasizing that “the ‘real world’ Morpheus points to in that scene is, in fact, two orders removed from the world supposedly outside the hull of the *Nebuchadnezzar*” (Felluga, 77). If we also consider the mysterious manner, in which Morpheus approached Neo in the infamous hotel room scene, offering him the choice between the two pills, it is highly surprising that all Neo gets to see of the real world, are actually

images on a TV-screen.

Was it not Morpheus, of all people, who told Neo when they first met that “the Matrix is everywhere, it’s all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out of your window or on your television” (Wachowski, 30)? The whole Construct sequence appears even more ironic, because Morpheus insisted so strongly on the fact that “no one can be told what the Matrix is, you have to see it for yourself” (Wachowski, 30). Felluga suspects, therefore, that “all may not be right with the (real) world” either (Felluga, 78).

2.3.2. Dream or Simulation: Swallowed by the Universal Mirror

Similar ideas are explored by a number of critics. In her thought-provoking article “The Collapse of Reality and Illusion in *The Matrix*,” Aylish Wood proposes the thought experiment that the real world of the *Nebuchadnezzar* is nothing but another illusion as powerful as that of the Matrix. Wood remarks that the two spheres are soon established as distinct, but “such a distinction itself turns out to be something of an illusion” (Wood, 127). Both Felluga and Wood go on to make the point that the Wachowskis included “a myriad of intertextual allusions” (Wood, 127) in their film, so that it appears virtually impossible to get at the heart of the distinction between the real world and the Matrix.

A strong argument in favor of that theory, is the point that there are so many references to texts in which dreams and various dream-scenarios predominate. The two most famous and probably best-known texts that introduce the theme of dreaming to *The Matrix*, are *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*. The references to both texts are quite explicit. At the very beginning of the film, Neo is told to “follow the white rabbit,” in order to get to Trinity; it is Trinity, then, who brings him to Morpheus. When they finally meet, one of the first things Morpheus says to Neo is, “I imagine, right now, you must be feeling a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit hole” (Wachowski, 28). Inviting Neo to take the red pill, Morpheus promises Neo to show him “how deep the rabbit-hole goes” (Wachowski, 29). With regard to Neo’s bewilderment and his subsequent adventure, Merrin writes humorously that this is rather “*Alice* read through Jefferson’s Airplane’s acid trip ‘White Rabbit’ where pills not cookies bring the expansion of consciousness”

(Merrin, n.p.).²²

So, instead of a little girl, the Wachowskis send a grown-up man on a fantastic journey. Unlike Alice and Dorothy, there is no turning back for Neo once he enters Wonderland, and contrary to the girls' journeys, Neo is leaving behind a fantasy world, in order to embark on a journey to the supposedly "real" one. Catherine Constable rejects Gordon's view that the reference to *Alice* suggests a clear distinction between the simulated world of the Matrix and the supposedly real world of Zion. She believes that those critics who invert the structures of *Alice in Wonderland* and apply them to *The Matrix* are, in fact, completely mistaken. Quite on the contrary, Constable argues, the references to *Alice in Wonderland* make the alleged journey to the real profoundly ambiguous in that the choice of the red pill marks the beginning of the space of adventure, thus paralleling Alice's journey" (Constable, 240):

Constable agrees with Felluga, who questions Morpheus' status as the "voice of truth." The reason for this suspicion is the most important allusion to dreams and dream worlds in *The Matrix*, and that is certainly Morpheus' character. Like Neo's pseudonym refers to his identity as the "One," so does Morpheus' name evoke a figure from Greek mythology, the god of dreams. Morpheus is mentioned in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and described as "a master at stimulating humans, at counterfeiting men" (Felluga, 78). Furthermore, as Schuchardt points out, Morpheus's name is the linguistic root for "morphine," which is "a drug that induces sleep and freedom from pain," as well as for "morphing," which implies "using computer technology to seamlessly transform from one reality to another" (Schuchardt, 7).

This knowledge is enough to make us suspicious of the sincerity of Morpheus' actions, who claims, after all, that his only desire is to find the "One" and wake him from his sleep, so he can, in turn, free all of humanity. To make things even more complicated, Neo ends his traumatic trip "down the rabbit hole," when he reaches Morpheus' ship, the *Nebuchadnezzar*. This hovercraft, which accesses the real, is named after the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who is said to have had "troubling, prophetic dreams that

²² This leads Wood to suggest that *The Matrix* might not even be about a man "who is the saviour, but a man who is enjoying the fantasy/dream/trip or even game of being the savior" (Wood, 128).

eventually drove him mad” (Felluga, 78). All these allusions to dreams and fantasy worlds culminate in Morpheus’ speech, when he asks the completely bewildered Neo following questions, before he offers him the red pill, “have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream, Neo? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?” (Wachowski, 32).

For most critics who argue that *The Matrix* misrepresents Baudrillard, it is this particular scene, during which Neo swallows the red pill and is being prepared for his “re-birth” into the real world, which constitutes the most crucial break, not only with Baudrillard, but with postmodern theory in a more general sense (cf. Felluga, 80). During this sequence, Neo is seated in a chair, while “Trinity begins gently fixing white electrode disks to him. Near the chair is an old oval dressing mirror that is cracked” (Wachowski, 31). This fragmented mirror, which miraculously becomes whole as Neo looks into it, is the most important object in this scene. Neo keeps staring at the “webwork of cracks that slowly run together as though the mirror were becoming liquid” (Wachowski, 31). Unable to believe his own eyes, Neo cannot help but reach out his hand to touch the mirror, which then, indeed, liquefies and threatens to swallow him, as it covers his entire body. The shooting script depicts the eerie scene in a matter-of-fact style, describing in detail how Neo’s fingers are suddenly “distended into mirrored icicles that begin to melt rapidly, dripping, running like wax down his fingers, spreading across his palm, where he sees his face reflected” (Wachowski, 31).

If this scene represents Neo’s transgression from the imaginary, simulated, sphere of the Matrix into the real world, then this clearly contradicts Baudrillard. In his essay “Simulacra and Science Fiction,” he describes the world of third-order simulation in greater detail, and explains that science fiction itself is no longer possible in the hyperreal, because “we can no longer imagine any other universe: the grace of transcendence was taken away from us” (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 123). The Wachowskis seem to reject Baudrillard’s pessimism—or, rather, nihilism—that, once we are caught in a Matrix, there is no escape from it; we can only dream of an encounter with Morpheus, who will offer us the red pill. Baudrillard asserts that “one does not see an alternative cosmos...—one is from the start in a total

simulation, without origin, immanent, without a past, without a future, a diffusion of all coordinates” (*Simulation*, 125).

Most importantly, we must not confuse simulation with a parallel universe, as fantasized about in so many science fiction adventures, because it is neither real nor unreal—it is hyperreal, “a universe of simulation, which is something else altogether” (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 125). Up this point, we might almost assume that Baudrillard was writing about *The Matrix* itself. In the following key-section of the essay, Baudrillard makes the case for the impossibility of transcending simulation. Whereas science fiction has always played on the, either artificial or imaginary, “double universe,” this option disappears in the realm of simulation. As Baudrillard clarifies, once again,

there is no longer the double, one is always already in the other world, which is no longer an other, without a mirror, a projection, or a utopia that can reflect it—simulation is insuperable, unsurpassable, dull and flat, without exteriority—we will no longer pass through to “the other side of the mirror,” that was still the golden age of transcendence. (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 125)

If we assume that it is indeed the “real” world that Neo is about to access, after the life-threatening procedures Morpheus puts him through, then it seems hard to come to an agreement with Baudrillard.

There are many different interpretations of this particular scene.²³ Felluga suggests that the Wachowskis wanted to visually represent a Lacanian regression, “past the ‘symbolic order’ of our ideological matrices, past the ‘mirror stage,’ ... all the way through to the real” (Felluga, 80). By implying to illustrate an inward journey to the Real, however, the Wachowskis seem to have misunderstood, or simply ignored, an essential definition from Lacanian psychoanalysis, according to which the Real is “the impossible.” Alex Blazer, on the other hand, welcomes the Wachowskis endeavor to try and “physically [realize] the Real” (Blazer, n.p.). The point to be made is that it plays no pivotal role, whether *The Matrix* adheres accurately to Lacan’s or Baudrillard’s theories. According to Blazer, “this cut through the Symbolic chain of signification and submersion in a Real realm that underlies everything we thought we knew is precisely that which provides such

²³ Cf. Alex Blazer for a Lacanian reading of the entire film in “The Matrix Trilogy and the Revolutionary Drive through “The Desert of the Real.” Russell Kilbourn interprets Neo’s merging with the mirror as an illustration of “the subject’s assimilation by Baudrillard’s simulacrum, effacing the distinction between the subject’s organic authenticity and its reflection, as if reality were continuous with the mirror’s depthless surface” (Kilbourn, 1037).

stimulation to postmodern critics" (Blazer, n.p.).

Such an attitude would invariably confirm those critics' views that *The Matrix* is, at heart, nothing but "intellectual poseur." It would inevitably lead to the conclusion that the Wachowskis were simply alluding to complex postmodern theories, without thoroughly thinking them through. To be quite ironic, one might say that, with a bit of Baudrillard here, a dash of Lacanian psychoanalysis there, the authors of *The Matrix* managed to spice up an otherwise dull and predictable science fiction-plot.

Nevertheless, Dino Felluga argues that we only need to look closer and listen more carefully to the dialogues, in order to find out that *The Matrix* is postmodern through and through. He argues that "the Wachowskis make it clear that on some level humans will always remain one step removed from any direct access to the real" (Felluga, 80). Felluga cites two scenes in particular, which are supposed to demonstrate that there is, in fact, no inherent misunderstanding of postmodern theory to be detected in the film, as other critics have argued.

First of all, Felluga points to the mess-hall discussion, which is actually the longest conversation between the crew-members, taking place in the real world. The discussion revolves around the question, whether it is inevitable for humans to create fantasy worlds, in order to make living in the real world more bearable. Mouse, a programmer on Morpheus' ship, claims that humans will always try to find ways to escape their daily routine. Therefore, he offers Neo a rendezvous with the "woman in the red dress," who is his own virtual creation, as Mouse proudly explains. He designed her, because he cannot live simply on a "single-celled protein" diet, for his human body has also other desires than only food.

So, the main import from the food scene, and the discussion of the woman in the red dress, is not only to "confirm the loneliness and difficulty of life on the Nebuchadnezzar" (Schuchardt, 9), but also to confirm that human body "needs fantasy-space of desire, because direct access to the real is akin to madness" (Felluga, 80). It is suggested that both the humans in the "real" world, and the ones who are kept in the machines' pods, are reliant on some kind of virtual realities, or simulation, and therefore, it follows that "the human mind cannot live with the unadulterated real" (Felluga, 79). Furthermore, it is

this insight that “most clearly distinguishes postmodern theory from earlier understandings of ideology as ‘false consciousness,’ as that which obscures some underlying truth. For postmodernists, *any* representation is always already ideological” (Felluga, 79). This leads to the conclusion that the Matrix clearly adheres to ideology in the postmodern sense, as it “creates the very ‘reality’ that surrounds us” (Felluga, 79).

As a second example, Felluga cites Agent Smith’s speech, in which he reveals to Morpheus that the very first version of the Matrix failed, because it was designed as a perfect utopia. Smith explains,

did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops were lost. Some believed we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that, as a species, human beings define their reality through suffering and misery. (Wachowski, 96)

Felluga refers to Lacan, once again, in order to show that this particular incident, as told by Smith, makes perfect sense, and is crucial to the understanding of the Matrix. The greatest problem with such a situation, which promises the fulfillment of one’s every fantasy would ultimately lead to psychosis, as suggested by Smith in the above quote. Our human psyche needs to perpetuate that “play *between* desire and ‘impossible real’ that ensures our desires are never fulfilled completely” (Felluga, 81) – and the Wachowskis seemed to be perfectly aware of that.

That still leaves the question unanswered, however, whether Baudrillard should feel misunderstood, or not. Although we have seen that an interpretation of the mirror-scene is hard to be brought into accordance with the theory of simulation, there is still another argument in favor of Baudrillard. We have seen that *The Matrix* cannot be valid as a paradigm of simulation, if we take Morpheus by his word, and believe that the “real world” is perfectly authentic, with Zion being indeed the last “real” human resort in a devastated world, dominated by AI.

However, if there is no possibility of confirming that the real world Morpheus and his crew inhabit, is indeed “real,” then we might as well assume that the “real” is simply another simulation. For all one knows that world could be controlled by a yet more sophisticated master-program,

devised to keep those humans at bay, whose minds are too resistant and cannot sufficiently be manipulated by the Matrix's simulation program. After all, in the intricate Wachowski-universe, such a presumption does not even seem far-fetched. Felluga also speculates that the Matrix and "the real world" may very well be part of a larger "all-encompassing Matrix" that has managed to create "the perception of an escape into the real so as to keep the still-oblivious bodies of its 'real' human batteries perpetually locked into the machine" (Felluga, 82).

That is precisely where Baudrillard enters the big picture again. In his "Precession" essay, there is a sub-section entitled "The hyperreal and the imaginary," in which he demonstrates how an alleged fantasy world can successfully function as a "cover" for a simulation of the third order—that is his famous analysis of Disneyland. "Disneyland," Baudrillard explains, "exists in order to hide that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America that is Disneyland" (*Simulation*, 12). He draws a poignant comparison between Disneyland and prisons, which serve the purpose of concealing the fact that it is society as a whole that keeps us incarcerated. Disneyland, as Baudrillard further explicates, is presented as

imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 13)

Is it possible that the AIs have acquired that much knowledge about how the human psyche functions, so they have designed the "real world" to operate in such a way as to "regenerate a reality principle in distress," for those humans who desperately need it (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 14)? Following Baudrillard's Disneyland example, we could theorize that the Matrix is presented as imaginary in order to make the rebels believe that Zion, and the devastated land that surrounds it, is indeed real, whereas it is all part of an omnipresent super-matrix, i.e. already belonging to the hyperreal order. In a hyperreal world it is not difficult to seduce people into believing that they can regain that lost sense of reality, because "paradoxically, it is the real that has become our true utopia—but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible,

that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object" (Baudrillard, *Simulation*, 123).

From this, it follows, that the "real world" can by no means be "real," because, once the real is lost, it is impossible to recreate it, and therefore Zion cannot be anything but another fantasy, another simulation. Thus, it could be shown that Felluga was right, when claiming that it was possible to demonstrate how the Wachowskis stayed true to Baudrillard, even when they seemingly contradicted him.

Gordon rejects Felluga's idea that the Wachowskis tried to blur the separation between the "real world" and the Matrix, even though Felluga gives convincing reasons for such an assumption. Gordon argues that this possibility is very unlikely, simply because "[t]his would further confuse the viewer, to no real purpose" (Gordon, 100). This seems like a weak argument, considering that the Wachowskis wanted to include "as many ideas as possible" in the movie. Hence, why should that particular idea be dismissed as "unlikely," especially if there are clear hints that point towards such a possibility? Apart from Felluga, there are other critics, such as Slavoj Žižek or Peter B. Lloyd, who also suggest that there might be more matrices out there.

William Merrin poses the question, whether it is possible that this "reality," which Neo seemingly never doubts, is "one created for the machines by another intelligence to keep the machines themselves in happy slavery" (Merrin, n.p.). This idea would not necessarily be in accordance with Baudrillard, and Merrin admits that it is not very likely, since "a mainstream, blockbuster film needs truths to deliver" (Merrin, n.p.). However, if we disregard the fact that *The Matrix* needs to satisfy the expectations of a large audience, we would find that "the simulacrum has one last trick to play on us here," precisely because it "removes the possibility of the real" (Merrin, n.p.), which the plot of *The Matrix* seems to depend on. Merrin cites Deleuze, who wrote in his essay "Plato and the Simulacrum," that behind every cave there must necessarily be a another deeper cave, and therefore the realm of the Matrix cannot be the only simulated reality in the film (cf. Merrin, n.p.).

If the Wachowskis really insisted on a separation between fantasy and reality, which is highly questionable after all, their film would simply not be

“crazy” enough, as Slavoj Žižek sees it. He also indicates that is very likely that “the very ‘desert of the real’ is generated by another matrix” (Žižek, “The Matrix,” 245). That “other” Matrix is often referred to as the Meta-Matrix or the Blue-Matrix, and as Peter B. Lloyd points out, there are indeed enough allusions to such a Meta-Matrix. In his analysis of Baudrillard’s appearance in the film, and consequently Morpheus’ speech about the “desert of the real” during the Construct-sequence, he writes that “[Morpheus] is referring not to a genuine reality but to an illusion of reality within a fully virtual world. He is implying that the scorched Earth is not real, but virtual: a simulacrum of something that never existed” (Lloyd, n.p.).

Lloyd, who is the author of the well-known article “Glitches in the Matrix,” in which he tried to meticulously explain some of the rather inexplicable phenomena in *The Matrix*, is very keen on finding evidence that there is a Meta-Matrix. Eventually, he argues that what Morpheus is actually trying to achieve, is to transfer humanity from one virtual prison to another – out of the Matrix, right into Zion. Lloyd further argues that Neo himself hollowed out his copy of Simulacra and simulation, because he rejects Baudrillard’s pessimism, and his assertion that revolution is pointless, because the system is too strong. Lloyd thinks that “Neo will find a way to break out of this seemingly nihilistic prison,” in order to finally reach a universe, in which humans can live their lives in freedom (Lloyd, n.p.). Such a vision, however, would also be in clear contradiction to Baudrillard, as he is often criticized for his nihilism. Do the Wachowskis really imply that there is an escape from hyperreality or not? James Rovira argues that “the film’s unabashed optimism is that individuals can finally understand the system in which they are caught well enough to manipulate it,” so that it operates according to their own wishes (Rovira, n.p.).

In his critique of the Wachowskis supposedly “misleading” reference to Baudrillard, Vartan Messier also seeks to expose Lloyd’s and Felluga’s explanations as wrong. Messier acknowledges the fact that the Construct-sequence “legitimizes the idea that the scorched earth that Neo witnesses for the first time *is virtual* and hence, as much a simulation as the original matrix” (Messier, n.p.), but he is still in disagreement with that theory. As Lloyd has argued, this infinite recursion of matrices – humans perpetually waking up

from one matrix to find themselves unknowingly in another – would be in perfect consistence with Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality (cf. Lloyd, n.p.). Messier, however, accuses “the likes of Lloyd” of not carefully reading Baudrillard, and therefore misunderstanding him completely.

As Baudrillard emphasized in *Simulacra and Simulation*, the hyperreal is “produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times” (*Simulation*, 2). According to Messier’s reading of Baudrillard, he suggests that all these “cells, matrices, and memory banks” have actually “*collapsed* to produce the hyperreal, and *not* that the hyperreal is able to produce itself to infinity as Lloyd claims” (Messier, n.p.). Hence, Messier sees himself as the only critic, who really understands Baudrillard, and he asserts that there are not many hyperrealities, but “only one hyperreality; it is the one we live in” (Messier, n.p.). That is, for him, the crucial point that the Wachowski brothers have obviously misunderstood—but that is not at all surprising, since they are themselves being instrumentalized by the great institutional power that is Hollywood.

2.4. The Wachowski Bros. vs. The Warner Bros.

Even if their adherence to Baudrillard in the movie is more or less disputable, the Wachowskis earned more critique for their implicit, as well as explicit, critique of capitalism – which Baudrillard has famously described as “instantaneously cruel, incomprehensibly ferocious, and fundamentally immoral.” The Wachowskis’ criticism is visible right at the beginning of the film, as the Warner Bros. logo appears manipulated. The creators of the film explained that the alteration of the studio-logo came about, because they felt that Warner Bros. is akin to an evil empire (cf. Felluga, 83). In order to show the audience that the Wachowski brothers actually oppose the multinational capitalism of the entertainment industry, the famous logo is veiled in colors of green and grey. It is certainly no coincidence that the cinematographers have used green filters to shoot those scenes, which take place inside the simulated realm of the Matrix (cf. Gordon, 100).

Is the Wachowskis’ attitude to be taken seriously? On the one hand, they read Baudrillard, wear their baseball caps backwards, and run around in

Converse sneakers. On the other hand, however, it seems ironic, at best, to suggest that the creators of a blockbuster which earned unimaginable amounts of money, are critical of the very system that helped them generate such an incredible success. Felluga asks the logical questions, whether it is possible for the Wachowskis to attempt a critique of capitalism, 'from within the very heart of a mass-market product' (Felluga, 83). Andrew Gordon's reply to that question is a clear "no," since he feels that a crude reference to Jean Baudrillard, who is himself a harsh, but controversial, critic of capitalism, does not make the entire project a viable critique of the capitalist system.

Gordon does not conceal his contempt for Baudrillard's vision of the future, as he sees him as an overrated fatalist and prophet of doom. Baudrillard has also argued in his book *America* that Americans have already lost all touch with reality, and he explains that

[h]aving known no primitive accumulation of time, [America] lives in a perpetual present. Having seen no slow, centuries-long accumulation of principle of truth, it lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs. It has no ancestral territory. (Baudrillard, *America*, 76)

Baudrillard sees no hope on the horizon, because once lost, the real can no longer be recovered, and what follows is only more and more simulation. It seems that Gordon mentions Baudrillard's criticism of the American Way of Life not without a reason, since he wants to establish a connection between Baudrillard and *The Matrix* on another level rather than the plot-level. Trying to assign the different orders of simulation to the respective spheres in the movie, one can only fail, because on that level, Baudrillard was either misused or misunderstood (cf. Gordon, 92).

Gordon feels that the Wachowskis main agenda by including Baudrillard in their movie was to wake up the audience, if anything, and speak to the viewers directly, by trying to warn them that "it is not just for the characters in the film but also for the film audience that 1999 is a dream world, a fourth order simulation" (Gordon, 92). Gordon himself, however, is highly suspicious of such charitable aims, even though he concedes that *The Matrix* might be taken as a commentary on our current situation, a protest against the "corporate cubicle lives, the sort of artificial life Neo must reject" (Gordon, 92). Nevertheless, he rejects interpretations of the movie, which see it as the

ultimate rebellion against the American capitalist hegemony.

As another example of overrated and exaggerated criticism, Gordon mentions Slavoj Žižek's criticism of present-day America and his views on *The Matrix*. In his complex and dense article about the movie, Žižek writes that "[t]he ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian despiritualized universe is the dematerialization of 'real life' itself, its reversal into a spectral show" (Žižek, "The Matrix," 243). That is precisely where he sees the main parallels between the science-fiction of the movie on the hand, and our present reality, on the other. In his critique of "virtual" capitalism, i.e. those "financial speculations disconnected from the sphere of material production" (Žižek, "Reflections on WTC," n.p.), he observes that the Wachowski brothers brought this logic to its climax with their film. In *The Matrix*, Žižek writes, "the material reality we all experience and see around us is a virtual one, generated and coordinated by gigantic mega-computer to which we are all attached" (Žižek, "Reflections on WTC," n.p.).

That is how we should perceive the movie, i.e. as a parable of what is yet to come, if we do not realize what danger lies in the proliferation of "virtual" capitalism. Žižek, it seems, is no less a fatalist than Baudrillard, for instance. It is precisely this kind of dooms-day criticism, however, that Gordon rejects wholeheartedly, because the "dystopian metaphors of science fiction have strongly affected contemporary theory" (Gordon, 92). Therefore, the pessimism inherent to Baudrillard's or Žižek's criticism of our present-day reality is quite exaggerated and completely out of place. It seems that Gordon condemns both the influence of "science fiction" on theory, as well as the influence of theory on science fiction, and therefore vigorously repudiates the idea that this "virtual prison in the film is supposed to resemble our present" (Gordon, 92). Even though critics like Felluga are also very cautious, when it comes to celebrating the Wachowskis as warriors against the evils of capitalism, they do give the brothers credit for inspiring the audience to think, and question some concepts they previously took for granted. As Felluga writes, the Wachowskis "force us to see the matrices that structure, manipulate, and re-present" our own reality, and that is more than we could ever expect from a "conventional Hollywood product" (Felluga, 84).

There are even more enthusiastic commentators, such as P. Chad Barnett,

who are convinced that *The Matrix* actually has the potential to inspire viewers to question the viability of the capitalist system, and ultimately encourage them to revolt against it (cf. Barnett, 372). Gordon laughs off such opinions, saying that someone like Barnett perhaps spent too much time indulging in the work of Fredric Jameson (cf. Gordon, 96). Gordon claims that *The Matrix* is “far from radical in its plot” (Gordon, 96), in order to incite actual protest among the viewers. Moreover, the Wachowskis are not even in the position to criticize capitalism in the very first place, since they are inextricably linked to the Hollywood system.

Evidently, the Wachowskis had to make a number of compromises, in order to please the studio bosses and audiences alike. Gordon argues that simply by including “nods to postmodern critical theory,” the Wachowskis did not succeed in making an intellectually demanding or philosophically profound movie, because their audience “is not the tiny elite that reads Baudrillard” (Gordon, 97). Is this not a serious flaw in Gordon’s own line of argumentation? Although he noted that the distinctions “high” and “low” culture have become fluid, he seems to insist on those very parameters, when judging *The Matrix*. He sees the film’s audience as a “generation bred on comics and computers, which demands fast and violent action” (Gordon, 97). In other words, he regards them as those cultural dupes that only consume the most obvious kinds of “low” culture, i.e. violent and brutal action films. Dino Felluga, on the other hand, argues that the Wachowskis actually “allow a mass market to enter into conversation with some of the more influential ‘high’ theorists of our own postmodern age” (Felluga, 84).

Gordon insists on his opinion that the viewers are completely oblivious of the philosophical subtext, but only revel in the special effects and ultra-violent action scenes, such as the lobby-massacre, in which Neo randomly shoots and kills a dozen of policemen. Furthermore, he points out that there are reviewers, who openly enjoyed the violence, as *The Matrix* “offers some of the most psychotic action scenes in American film” (Covert quoted in Gordon, 98). Gordon also draws a daring comparison between the aforementioned lobby scene in the film, and the real shoot out and killing at the Columbine High School, shortly after *The Matrix* debuted quite successfully at the box office (cf. Gordon, 99).

It is not easy to argue in favor of violence as a storytelling tool, unless it is clearly necessary for the plot. Gordon makes the interesting observation that the concept of hyperreality is actually misused in order to “inoculate us against the hyperviolence” in the movie (Gordon, 99). He further claims that, contrary to “far more thoughtful science fiction movies,” such as *Blade Runner* or *Minority Report*, the violence in *The Matrix* is always subordinated to serving the purpose of spectacle. Furthermore, there are reviewers who have remarked condescendingly that *The Matrix* “plays more like a video game than a movie” (Anthony, quoted in Gordon, 97), in which images of graphic violence is more important than the actual plot.

Owing to the fact that the film alludes to virtual reality and arguably resembles a computer game at times, it becomes difficult to judge come to terms with the depiction of excessive violence. Gordon argues, therefore, that “we cannot take the slaughter of the policemen seriously,” since they seem to represent nothing more but “anonymous targets in a video game, who exist only to be mowed down” (Gordon, 99). In other words, the Wachowskis have only used the references to critical theory in order to avert attention from the fact that their movie is simply another shallow firework display of action sequences and the latest special effects Hollywood has to offer.

All in all, Gordon concludes that *The Matrix* is influenced by Baudrillard, but distorts and misrepresents his ideas to such an extent that it is not faithful to his theories. Gordon argues that “*The Matrix* offers a simplified or romanticized notion of *Simulacra and Simulation*” (Gordon, 99), because the Wachowskis seem to propose a clear division between the computer-simulated world and the “real world.” He further claims that this division is also made “very clear visually” (Gordon, 100), and cites David Lavery in order to support his views. Lavery wrote in his article “From Cinespace to Cyberspace” that “the real world exists, even under the reign of Baudrillard’s ‘Third Order of Simulacra,’ and cinematic art...can represent it and tell a heroic tale of its recovery” (Lavery, 155).

Lavery’s article, however, is –with all due respect– quite an inappropriate source, when it comes to a thorough analysis of Baudrillard and *The Matrix*, since Lavery only mentions Baudrillard in passing, as it were. His rather short article puts more focus on the function of cinematic reproduction of reality,

and in how far films differ from virtual reality, rather than Baudrillard's theory of simulation. Hence, it is surprising that Gordon would cite Lavery as a seemingly reliable source to have his opinion confirmed.

Gordon's final response to Felluga's essay is the conclusion that *The Matrix* is ultimately a "flawed attempt at an 'intellectual action film,' in which spectacle sometimes overrides or contradicts the ideas it proposes" (Gordon, 101). Similar views are expressed by a critic in the *Science Fiction Studies* journal, who writes condescendingly that one can forgive a film, if it is obviously nothing but a spectacle, and does not aspire or pretend to be more than that. However, if it turns out that a science fiction film like *The Matrix*, "pretends to have a strong cognitive/ideational component (as in citing Baudrillard) and this component is half-baked or fudged, I start to seethe" ("The E-Files," 349).

This particular debate about Baudrillard is a very complex one, since it is impossible for the critics to come to any agreement. Even the question, whether the Matrix counts as a "third" or "fourth" order simulation, according to Baudrillard, is not easy to answer. Only James Rovira admits that this is one of the crucial problems surrounding this debate. He writes that "the distinction between these levels of simulacra may be unnecessarily artificial" (Rovira, n.p.), and not only the Wachowski brothers might have misunderstood it, but some of the critics themselves, as well. Mark Poster points out that Baudrillard himself has interrogated "the cultural forms of media communications from a consistent if ambivalent standpoint" (Poster, 45). Hence, it is not surprising that there is so much ambivalence and contradiction when it comes to interpreting *The Matrix* with regard to Baudrillard's own theories.

It seems that both those arguing in favor of the film's qualities as an "intellectual action film," and those who are against that labeling, have equally strong and convincing arguments to support their interpretations. Perhaps Slavoj Žižek is right with his observation that *The Matrix* functions as a kind of Rorschach test, "setting in motion the universalized process of recognition, like the proverbial painting of God which seems always to stare directly at you, from wherever you look at it" (Žižek, "The Matrix," 240).

Each critic of the film seems to lay claim to having written the only "correct"

reading of the film, being the ultimate source on postmodern theory and having discovered, or rather uncovered, the “truth” about *The Matrix*. The only people who might really know what they did and did not intend to achieve and express with their film, are the writers themselves, Andy and Larry Wachowski. In an online-chat with their fans, the creators of *The Matrix* were asked which of the many hints and allusions to philosophy and myth were indeed intentional. Their very short and telling answer was, “all of it” (“Wachowski Chat,” n.p.).

3. The Religious Matrix

The Matrix is a new testament for a new millennium, a religious parable of the second coming of mankind's messiah in an age that needs salvation as desperately as any ever has.

—Read Mercer Schuchardt,
“What is The Matrix?”

We're interested in mythology, theology and, to a certain extent, higher-level mathematics. All are ways human beings try to answer bigger questions, as well as The Big Question.

—Larry Wachowski,
“Popular Metaphysics”²⁴

At first sight, it might seem rather astonishing that a film, which is dominated by high technology and arguably inspired by postmodernist critical theory, is also replete with religious and mythical symbolism. In fact, it has been noted by most commentators that the majority of criticism published about the film deals with its religious themes. Particularly enthusiastic critics see *The Matrix* not as a “paradigm of postmodernism,” but rather as a “paradigm of Christianity,” for Neo obviously embodies the ideal 22nd century messiah (cf. Fontana, 179).

If we are to trust Glenn Yeffeth, the editor of *Science, Philosophy, and Religion in The Matrix*, Read Mercer Schuchardt's essay “What is The Matrix?” is the ultimate source about the true meaning of *The Matrix*. Yeffeth suggests that, “[i]f you only have time for one essay on *The Matrix*, this is the one to read” (Yeffeth, 5). This is certainly great praise for Schuchardt, but if one only relied on his essay in order to get an overview of what the Wachowski brothers' film is “about,” it would also be a rather narrow view. An obvious problem with Schuchardt's essay –and a number of other articles, for that matter– is the fact that the film tends to be exclusively interpreted from a Judeo-Christian perspective. For the sake of not being derided as narrow-minded, it seems, Schuchardt accedes that the film is also “influenced by Zen Buddhism or Eastern mysticism” (Schuchardt, 9). In an almost reluctant manner, he further concedes that at least the martial arts sequences “certainly reflect an Eastern influence” (Schuchardt, 9).

In the same volume, the author of “Finding God in *The Matrix*,” Paul Fontana, argues that, “despite its seemingly secular plot, God isn't

²⁴ Cf. Interview with *TIME* Magazine's Richard Corliss, n.p.

absent from *The Matrix*” (Fontana, 161). Apart from other elements that invite a Christian interpretation of the film, Fontana claims that “*The Matrix*’s character allegory provides the most evidence of Christian themes” (Fontana, 161). James Ford, on the other hand, offers an alternative perspective to Fontana’s allegedly one-sided analysis, and draws attention to the complex relationship between Buddhism and *The Matrix*. As he points out, the parallels between Neo and the Buddha are, in fact, more striking than those between Neo and Jesus Christ (cf. Ford, 127). In addition to Buddhism, the scholars Frances Flannery-Daily and Rachel Wagner analyzed the film also from a Gnostic point of view. Interestingly enough, they published their essay “Wake Up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in *The Matrix*,” not only in the *Journal of Religion and Film*, but also in the philosophical section of *The Matrix*’s website.²⁵ Whether this might suggest that the creators of *The Matrix* felt that Flannery-Daily and Wagner most appropriately interpreted their film, is a matter of perspective and subject to debate.

One of the editors of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, Julien Fielding, however, felt the need to “reassess” *The Matrix* in terms of previous religious criticism. Fielding basically attacks all of the above-mentioned critics for imposing “a singular religious paradigm on top of the [film]” (Fielding, n.p.). As if assuming the role of the only omniscient critic, Fielding criticizes all those scholars, who employ “one religious worldview to understand *The Matrix*,” for offering only trivial criticism (Fielding, n.p.). Moreover, he argues adamantly that this type of one-sided criticism is “almost too simplistic a method for a film this complex,” and therefore it “simply does not work” (Fielding, n.p.).

In this final chapter, I will look at the articles under criticism, which approach *The Matrix* from a Christian, Buddhist, and Gnostic perspective, for these are –arguably– the most prominently featuring world religions in the film. Subsequently, I will present Fielding’s criticism and analyze his allegedly “correct” interpretation of the Wachowskis brothers’ film. I will also address the question whether God actually plays a role in the film, or not, and in how far the Wachowski brothers’ mix of religious beliefs is, in fact, plausible.

²⁵ Cf. http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_fr_intro.html

3.1. *The Matrix* and The Holy Bible

In his article, “Finding God in *The Matrix*,” Paul Fontana claims that “[a]nyone with a religious background can notice some of the more obvious Biblical parallels in *The Matrix*” (Fontana, 160). Indeed, those who possess some knowledge about Christianity might compare characters in the film to specific characters found in the Bible. Especially the main characters’ names play an important part, as they are often the key to discovering some of the more obvious, but also much subtler Christian themes in the Wachowski brothers’ masterpiece.

First and foremost, the protagonist’s hacker-alias “Neo,” is an anagram of “one,” which immediately indicates that he is unique and exceptional. Further, *neo* means “new” in Greek, and is a likely reference to “the new life into which Neo enters and which, presumably, he will make possible for others” (Bassham, 111). The fact that we also get to know Neo’s supposedly “real” name in the Matrix, Thomas Anderson is of great importance, for both “Thomas” and “Anderson” have “clear Christian overtones” (Bassham, 111). According to the Gospels, it was the apostle Thomas, who doubted that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead—hence, the designation “Doubting Thomas.”²⁶ Likewise, Neo is plagued by a “splinter in his mind,” which makes him question the reality of the Matrix, and later, it is also significant that he is doubtful about assuming the role of the “One.” His last name, on the other hand, can be seen as a more direct reference to his identity as the chosen Messiah. As Bassham explains, the name Anderson “derives from the Greek root *andr-*, meaning ‘man,’” and in this sense, Anderson means “son of man,” which is a well-known “designation Jesus often gave to himself” (Bassham, 112).

Paul Fontana argues that Morpheus’ character is also closely related to a figure in the Bible, and that his “most prevalent role is John the Baptist” (Fontana, 167), even though the name “Morpheus” might hint at a connection to a figure from Greek mythology, as mentioned in the previous chapter. In any case, the similarity to John the Baptist cannot be downplayed. Fontana points out that it is reported in the Fourth Gospel that John’s “only duty is to make way for the coming for Jesus” (167). In *The Matrix*, it is

²⁶ Cf. John 20:24-29

Morpheus' "holy" mission to find the "One," which is evident in one of their first conversations, as Morpheus says, "you're the One, Neo. You see...I've spent most of my life looking for you" (Wachowski, 24). Moreover, when Morpheus first meets Neo in the Hotel Lafayette, the latter is awestruck and says, "it's an honor," to which Morpheus reverently replies, "no, the honor is mine" (Wachowski, 28). Most importantly, however, both Morpheus and John the Baptist assume the role of the "announcer of the coming savior...both display unwavering certainty that Neo/Jesus is the 'One'" (Fontana, 168).

Whereas Morpheus and Neo are clearly comparable to characters in the Bible, this becomes "a bit more vexing," when it comes to Trinity (Fontana, 168). As critics point out, the word "trinity" itself never appears in the Bible, although it designates the triune God, that is, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Gregory Bassham argues that Neo is "restored to life by the faith and love of Trinity," which might link Trinity to the Holy Spirit (Bassham, 112). Fontana, on the other hand, writes that a possible connection between Trinity and the Holy Spirit is "tenuous at best," for Trinity is obviously a female character in the film and therefore does not qualify as a part of the Godhead (Fontana, 168). Instead, Fontana likens her to Mary Magdalene, since Mary was a "prominent [woman] in a world of men," as well (Fontana, 168). Furthermore, it is reported in the Gospel of John that it was Mary Magdalene, who was the first person to see the risen Jesus.²⁷ In *The Matrix*, it is Trinity who is with Neo during both the moment of his death and resurrection. However, despite these similarities, the fact that Trinity and Neo share a kiss in the film undermines Trinity's equation to Mary Magdalene, as there is arguably "no textual evidence found in the New Testament to substantiate the claims of a sexual relationship between [Jesus and Mary Magdalene]" (Fontana, 169).

When it comes to identifying the villains in *The Matrix*, most critics immediately compare the operator on Morpheus's ship, Cypher, to the traitor Judas, who handed Jesus over to the authorities. Cypher's name, however, lends itself to various interpretations, other than the Judas-connection. For instance, Gregory Bassham describes him as the "Mephistophelian character, who betrays the rebels," and suggests that "*Cypher* sounds a bit

²⁷ Cf. John 20:14

like *Lucifer*" (Bassham, 113). Indeed, there is another detail that links Cypher to the Satan, as Schuchardt insightfully points out, and that is his snakeskin jacket, which is an allusion to the connection between the serpent and the Satan (cf. Schuchardt, 9). Furthermore, if we consider that the word "cypher" could also refer to the number "zero," this certainly alludes to his ultimate status as a "moral zero," for he is the one who betrays the crew. Finally, in binary computer code, a 0 means the opposite of 1—hence, Neo is the One, while Cypher is the evil anti-One (cf. Stucky, n.p.).

Fontana, however, clearly identifies Cypher as Judas, and not as the Satan. There are indeed many correspondences between Judas and Cypher, as Fontana points out in his essay. For instance, there is a scene in the film, which can be rightly interpreted as the re-enactment of the Last Supper, during which Jesus identifies Judas as the one who will be his betrayer.²⁸ Likewise, Cypher and Neo's version of the Last Supper also shows them sharing a cup of liquor, while Cypher voices his doubts about the crew's mission. Neo eventually walks away, for he seems slightly irritated by Cypher's regrets, as the traitor laments, "why oh why didn't I take that blue pill?" (Wachowski, 59). Moreover, Neo does not finish his drink and it is indicated that Cypher is "up to no good when he breaks the convention of social hygiene by finishing Neo's drink for him after he leaves" (Schuchardt, 9). Finally, Cypher's secret meeting with Agent Smith inside the Matrix is a logical follow-up to this "last supper" on the *Nebuchadnezzar*.

Fontana mentions that Cypher is also paid for his traitorous actions, similar to Judas, who "receives thirty silver pieces to turn sides" (Fontana, 170). Correspondingly, as a reward, Cypher is promised to be reinserted into a Matrix-pod with the prospect of leading the life of a successful and rich actor inside the simulated dreamworld. Fontana argues that the fact that "both are paid for their actions highlights their common greed, selfishness, and myopia" (Fontana, 170). Finally, another characteristic they have in common is their lacking faith in the Messiah, be it Jesus or Neo. Fontana emphasizes how neither of them "believed that the object of their betrayal was the savior of the world or, presumably, they would not have gone through with their actions" (Fontana, 170). Cypher is quite sarcastic when he

²⁸ "Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon," (John 13:26).

makes it clear to Neo that he has no trust in Morpheus or the Oracle's prophecy, and definitely alienates Neo when he says, "Jesus! What a mind job. You're here to save the world...what do you say to something like that?" (Wachowski, 59).²⁹

The critic Julien Fielding, however, argues that Cypher cannot be equated to Judas, since "in the context of the film, Cypher is not working against Neo. He is gunning for Morpheus" (Fielding, n.p.). After the Agents manage to capture Morpheus, Trinity realizes that someone must have betrayed them, and Cypher confesses his deed to her. Moreover, he tells her that he is "tired of this war...tired of fighting...tired of this ship. [Morpheus] lied to us, Trinity! He tricked us..." (Wachowski, 91). From these lines, we realize that Cypher's anger and frustration is indeed primarily directed at Morpheus. When it comes to Neo, Cypher seems to have only sympathy, for Neo is yet another victim of Morpheus' fanatic belief in the prophecy and the possible end of the war. Nevertheless, Fontana insists that Cypher bears clear resemblance to Judas. Fontana does acknowledge that it *is* contrary to the narrative in the Bible that the Agents are initially chasing after Morpheus instead of Neo. Yet, this circumstance is not "fatal to the allegory because in turning over Morpheus, Cypher is betraying the whole crew and all of humanity," which is precisely what Judas did (Fontana, 171).

Apart from these links between character names and figures from the Bible, the "theme of the promised deliverer" is certainly the most prominent Christian motif in *The Matrix* (Bassham, 111). Fontana, for instance, argues that the film is heavily influenced by Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thought, which becomes quite apparent after a thorough analysis—such as his own, of course. In the underlying article, Fontana argues that "[t]he theology of *The Matrix* is informed by the...hope for messianic deliverance, restoration and establishment of the Kingdom of God" (161). Further, he writes that "[t]his film is surprisingly true to Biblical theology—despite its unorthodox appearance" (Fontana, 161), which shall be demonstrated in the following section.

²⁹ Flannery-Dailey and Wagner cleverly point out that Neo's identification with Jesus is also – unknowingly– suggested by the ship's crew, who 'repeatedly swear in Neo's presence by saying 'Jesus' or 'Jesus Christ'" (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.).

3.1.1. The Gospel of Neo

Fontana began his analysis by demonstrating how the main characters in the film could be related to Biblical figures. Needless to say, it is Neo's character, who most prominently resounds with the messianic theme in Jewish and Christian religious thought. Early in the film, there is a scene, which obviously – and ironically – foreshadows Neo's fate as the anticipated savior, who must liberate humanity. The audience's first glimpse of Neo is rather unspectacular, however, as we simply get to see him in his "studio apartment that seems overgrown with technology...a technological rat-nest" (Wachowski, 10). He is asleep at his computer, as –suddenly– he is woken by an ominous computer-message, which says, "wake up, Neo... The Matrix has you... Knock, knock..." (Wachowski, 10). The mysterious message is immediately followed by a real knock at his door. It turns out to be a man called Choi, who came by to pick up illegal software that he ordered from Neo. At receiving the required computer disk, Choi exclaims, "Hallelujah! You're my savior, man. My own personal Jesus Christ!" (Wachowski, 11).

At first, this scene might seem like a "subtle Biblical pun," but there is even a more profound "indication of the Markan messianic secret," to be detected, according to Fontana (Fontana, 162). During their conversation Neo warns Choi to be extremely careful with using the software, and implicitly urges him not to disclose his hacker-identity at any cost, to which Choi responds, "I know, this never happened, you don't exist" (Wachowski, 11). Fontana argues that this is a hint to the Gospel of Mark, in which it is implied that Jesus is reluctant to be openly identified as the Messiah. Fontana points to the passage in St. Mark's Gospel, in which the apostle Peter confesses his belief that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus, however, emphatically instructs Peter not to reveal this truth to anyone.³⁰ It is assumed that Jesus wanted to keep his identity a secret, in order to avoid the "label of military messiah that dominated the popular imagination of Jewish messianic expectation" (Fontana, 162).

Very early in the film, during a phone conversation, Morpheus tells Neo that he is in great danger, because he is the "One," and the agents are already after him. However, only after Neo is freed from the Matrix, he learns

³⁰ Cf. Mark 8:29-30

more about his messianic significance. Morpheus tells him that, as the “One,” Neo has the ability to manipulate the Matrix at will. This particular capacity enables -and consequently commits him- to destroying the Matrix, because, “as long as the Matrix exists, the human race will never be free” (Wachowski, 44). With regard to this particular aspect of the film, Fontana points towards the Old Testament and ancient Israelite tradition, in which it was prophesied that a “great military leader—probably from the Davidic line³¹— would arise and restore Israel to its former glory while subjugating all of Israel’s enemies” (Fontana, 161). In the Book of Isaiah it says,

unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given,
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called...
The Prince of Peace. (*King James Bible* Isaiah 9:6)

This “prince of peace” was also referred to as the “messiah,” which means “anointed one” in Hebrew, and as Fontana explains, “anointing was a sign of kingliness” (Fontana, 161). Furthermore, Fontana relates how Jesus was indeed hailed as a true king upon his arrival in Jerusalem, which is well documented in the Gospels. Fontana explicates that people “hoped [Jesus] was the one who would finally free Israel from foreign rule and restore it to its proper relationship with God” (161). For Fontana, it is more than obvious that the Wachowskis have borrowed their story about the “One” from the Bible. The only contentious issue is the question, whether Neo really resembles, and might even be equated to, Jesus Christ, the peaceful messiah, or not. As Fontana mentions, particularly in St. Paul’s texts, it is emphasized that “Jesus’ mission was not at all military...[he] did nothing to further the cause of a sovereign Israel” (161). If we consider, however, Neo’s excessive resort to violence – during Morpheus’ rescue, or during the fight against Agent Smith – it is not surprising that Fontana insinuates that “Neo is closer to the military messiah that Israel expected than to the...suffering spiritual king,” who was Jesus of Nazareth (Fontana, 161).

Nonetheless, the references to, and similarities between Jesus’ life story and Neo’s seem to abound. Fontana highlights the fact that Jesus’ status as the Messiah was not uncontroversial at first, even among his followers.

³¹ David is one of the most important and glorious figures in the Bible, for he is known to have been the second king of a united Kingdom of Israel.

Everyone in ancient Israel was expecting the savior to be a worthy heir to David's throne, as suggested by the prophet Isaiah, which is why they believed that the Messiah would stand up to the foreign rule and fight for them—rather than sacrifice his life for them, as Jesus did. Likewise, not everyone on Morpheus' ship is convinced that Neo is the long-awaited "cyber-messiah." It is interesting to note that, while the crew has doubts, the ship itself seems to be proclaiming that Neo must be the "One," for there is a plaque on the *Nebuchadnezzar*, which contains a seemingly hidden Biblical message. On the plaque, it reads, among other information, "Mark 3 No. 11." That is a likely reference to a verse in the Bible that says, "and unclean spirits, when they saw him, fell down before him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God" (Mark 3:11). This could be read as an unmistakable hint at Neo's status as the "One." Those viewers, however, who do not happen to know the Gospel of Mark by heart, are continuously misled by the narrative and receive "conflicting data as to whether or not Neo is the 'One'" (Fontana, 162).

In one of the key-scenes of the movie, Neo is finally taken to meet the legendary Oracle, who actually prophesied the birth of "the One." As Morpheus explains, "she has been with us since the beginning...of the resistance" (Wachowski, 68). When Neo is allowed to enter the Oracle's room, he is rather surprised at her sight. "Not quite what you were expecting, right?" she says facetiously (Wachowski, 73). The Oracle, an elderly, witty, cigarette-smoking black woman in the film, is, of course, not a figure from the Bible, but a major figure in Greek mythology. Her character in *The Matrix* is probably modeled after the famous Oracle at Delphi, a priestess appointed by Apollo, who had the ability to provide people with unerring prophecies.³² The Oracle's message to Neo is quite ambivalent, however. On the one hand, she seems to imply that he is not "the One," but on the other hand, she never *explicitly* states that he is not. She tells Neo that he has got "the gift, but it looks like you're waiting for...your next life, maybe" (Wachowski, 75). Moreover, she reveals to Neo that "poor Morpheus," whose faith in Neo is

³² A direct reference to the Delphic Oracle is an inscription on a plaque in the filmic Oracle's kitchen, which is translated by her as "Know Thyself." That Greek aphorism was inscribed at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. In *The Matrix*, however, the inscription is not in Greek, but Latin.

unwavering, will offer his life, in order to save Neo's, since "he believes it so blindly" that Neo is "the One" (Wachowski, 76). It will be for Neo to decide who of them will keep on living, for "one of you is going to die," according to the Oracle (Wachowski, 76).

Even though the scene at the Oracle's apartment has nothing to do with the Bible—apart from the prophecy, perhaps—Fontana argues that the Oracle's message to Neo is "theologically significant" (163). This will become more apparent in the next section, which will deal with Neo's readiness to sacrifice his life for Morpheus' sake, and his subsequent resurrection.

3.1.2. The Passion Narratives – Neo Resurrected

In order to elucidate the parallels between Neo and Jesus, Fontana argues that there is an "overt allusion to the miracle of the raising of Lazarus," towards the end of the film (163). He draws our attention to one of the most dramatic and highly exciting action sequences, which is evocative of the Lazarus anecdote in the Gospel of John.³³ As foreshadowed by the Oracle, the Agents have taken Morpheus captive, in his selfless attempt to secure Neo's flight from the Matrix. Needless to say, Morpheus' life is in great danger, as a result of Agent Smith's torture.³⁴ Fontana suggests that the "long, narrow room," in which Morpheus is kept and interrogated, looks "much like the cave in which Lazarus was buried" (163). In what is certainly one of the most breathtaking scenes in the film, Neo captures a military helicopter with Trinity's help, and tries to rescue "a nearly comatose Morpheus" (Fontana, 163). In the shooting script, it is suggested that Neo is trying to hypnotize his comrade, as "Neo stares at Morpheus, trying to will him into action" (Wachowski, 112). Finally, as he shouts, "Morpheus, get up!" (Wachowski, 112), it is certainly reminiscent of Jesus' command, "Lazarus, come forth" (John 11:43). Fontana claims that "in both these instances it is the power that emanates from the agents of salvation (Neo and Jesus) that raises the men in the tombs" (163).³⁵

³³ Cf. John 11

³⁴ Smith is trying to force Morpheus into revealing the entrance codes to Zion's mainframe. Thus, the machines could easily locate the last human city and annihilate it effortlessly. Hence, saving Morpheus also implies saving the inhabitants of Zion.

³⁵ Jesus' power is demonstrated in his speech, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

Both these occasions, the raising of Lazarus, and the “raising” of Morpheus, as it were, are crucial episodes in Jesus’, as well as Neo’s lives. As Paul Fontana indicates, “it is during this last and most dramatic of Jesus’ miracles that he attracts a large enough crowd to become a public threat” (163). Furthermore, after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, those who doubted his abilities started believing. St. John writes that “many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him” (John 11:45). Similarly, Morpheus’ seemingly miraculous rescue makes both Trinity and Tank finally realize that Neo must be “the One,” after all.³⁶ Moreover, Fontana rightly highlights the fact that “it is here that the agents who had previously set their sights only on Morpheus turned their attention to Neo” (163).

The ultimate “proof” that Neo is comparable with Jesus, are the noticeable parallels to the passion narratives in the Gospels, which document Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension into the sky. Neo’s death occurs in a motel room, where he hoped to find a viable exit from the Matrix. After Neo and Trinity had rescued their leader, all three of them tried to exit the Matrix. Unfortunately, only Trinity and Morpheus managed to escape before Smith found them. Neo, however, got caught in a subway station, forced to fight the Agent. Unable to defeat the sentient program, Neo fled to a nearby motel, but he could not escape Smith and his fellow Agents—in room 303, he is eventually shot by Smith. Fontana underlines the fact that ‘like the Gospels, the makers of *The Matrix* make it clear that Neo is really dead...if he just rallies after getting shot that would not be as miraculous’ (164).

At this point, the importance of the number “303” needs to be expounded on a bit further. It is probably an allusion to the three days that Jesus lay dead in his tomb, and then rose from the dead on the third day.³⁷ Fontana assumes that it might not have been “possible within the plot of the film to have Neo dead for three days,” and therefore “this symbolic visual cue is all the film needs to alert the audience members to the significance of this momentary death” (164). Read Mercer Schuchardt puts it more sarcastically,

³⁶ Before he decided to jack into the Matrix and save Morpheus, Neo told Trinity and Tank that he was not “the One,” and that the Oracle presumably confirmed his own suspicion.

³⁷ “For I delivered unto you first of all that...he was buried, and that he rose again from the dead on the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

when he describes how, after receiving a kiss from Trinity, Neo is “resurrected in the Hollywood equivalent of three days, which is about three seconds” (Schuchardt, 11). Another interesting parallel to the Gospels, with regard to the resurrection, is the detail that “it is a woman or a group of women who find the empty tomb and are the first to see Jesus” (Fontana, 164). Correspondingly, in *The Matrix*, it is Trinity, who takes care of the lifeless Neo, and is the first to see him as he comes back to life again.

Neo’s miraculous resurrection is probably the most striking similarity between *The Matrix* and the Gospels, and “any New Testament-savvy audience member” will be aware of that (Fontana, 164). What is of paramount theological significance, however, is the crucial difference between the pre- and post-resurrection Neo. Fontana points toward a particular book in the New Testament, that is, the First Epistle to the Corinthians, written by St. Paul. Especially in First Corinthians 15, Paul underlines the central importance of the resurrection for Christianity.³⁸ Fontana urges us to look at Paul’s description of Jesus’ resurrected body, for it gives us a clue toward a better understanding of the risen Neo.

Comparing Jesus’ fleshly body to his resurrected body, Paul writes, “it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:43-44). Fontana argues that there are “remarkable similarities” between the risen Jesus and the “risen” Neo. After his resurrection, Neo himself finally realizes that he is “the One.” At last, he is capable of doing things that seemed quite impossible before—not only can he dodge bullets like the Agents, he surpasses their abilities, for he can actually stop the bullets. Moreover, he can fight Agent Smith with one hand only. Finally, Neo even usurps Smith’s body and literally destroys him from within. Neo is, undoubtedly, “the One,” for no one before him has managed to kill and destroy an agent (cf. Wachowski, 55).

Fontana indicates that now “[w]e know that the risen Neo is ‘imperishable,’ because there is nothing that the agents can do to hurt him” (165). At this point, the Oracle’s prediction that Neo is perhaps waiting for his “next life” makes much more sense, as well as Morpheus’ earlier remark

³⁸ “And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain” (1 Cor. 15:14).

about Neo's extraordinary abilities. When Neo asked whether Morpheus was implying that, as "the One," he could dodge bullets, Morpheus replies, "I'm trying to tell you that when you're ready, you won't have to" (Wachowski, 56). Later, during the spectacular rescue-sequence, Neo is forced to try dodging bullets, but he is still hit by one. Only after the resurrection, Neo is not threatened by bullets, since "[a]ll postresurrection appearances of Neo clearly indicate that his body is raised in 'power, glory, and imperishability'" (Fontana, 166).

If we bear in mind the Oracle's prophecy and Morpheus' own prediction about Neo, it seems that his death and resurrection were bound to occur. As Fontana highlights once again, "Neo only reaches his state of full actualization after the resurrection" (Fontana, 166), and therefore the inevitability of these events is revealed. The necessity of the Passion events is "a theme well-known in the Gospels...[that] tell us that Jesus freely gave himself up to be killed so that all may partake in the Kingdom of God" (Fontana, 166). There is also an essential "sacrificial element in *The Matrix* passion story" (Fontana, 166), for Neo is ready to give his life in exchange for Morpheus', as has been predicted by the Oracle. Furthermore, it is of far greater importance for humankind that Morpheus be rescued, since he is one of the keepers of the Zion-codes, which are necessary for the localization of the city, deep underground. Hence, Neo's actions, the self-sacrifice and martyrdom, are more similar to those of Jesus than becomes apparent at first sight, since they show his willingness to save humanity at any price (cf. Fontana, 166).

A final similarity to be detected, between the Gospels and *The Matrix*, are their respective endings. It is reported in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, for instance, that Jesus' miraculous resurrection is followed by his ascension to heaven.³⁹ Likewise, the last scene in *The Matrix* shows Neo giving his final speech, in which he addresses the AI, and not the faithful. Afterwards, he

³⁹ "So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). For those viewers, however, who would prefer a more secular interpretation of the scene, the Wachowski brothers offer the possibility of equating Neo to another film-hero, that is, Superman. It is likely that the Wachowskis, who are self-identified comic-fans, wanted to include such a hint, since it is indeed peculiar to see Neo stepping out of a phone booth and then flying above the simulated sky-scrapers, with his black (Superman-) cape fluttering in the air.

soars into the sky, which many critics claim is said to represent “a blatant ascent into heaven” (Stucky, n.p.).

3.2. Neo as Gnostic Redeemer

Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner are the authors of “Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in *The Matrix*,” which is another influential article about the film. They argue that the “the pervasive allusions to Gnosticism” might well illuminate the “overarching paradigm of *The Matrix*, namely, the problem of sleeping in ignorance in a dreamworld, solved by waking to knowledge or enlightenment” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.). The two critics were one of the first not to consider exclusively Christian elements in the film, but drew attention to Gnostic aspects, as well. In fact, they go so far as to claim that by “fusing [Gnosticism and Buddhism] with a technological vision of the future, the film constructs a new teaching that challenges its audience to question ‘reality’” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.).

Contrary to critics such as Paul Fontana, Flannery-Dailey and Wagner claim that in *The Matrix*, “the overall system of Christianity that is presented is not the traditional, orthodox one” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.). While Christian elements in the film are clearly discernible, they arguably only make sense if they are considered in a wider Gnostic context. Briefly, it is explained in the article that Gnosticism was an interpretation of Christianity, which had its hey-day at the beginning of the Common Era. Furthermore, Gnostics also had their own scriptures, which can be found at the Nag Hammadi Library.⁴⁰ Even though there are many varieties of Gnosticism, its religious system as a whole might indeed have a suiting explanation for the “true” nature of our universe and humanity’s place therein (cf. Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.).

The two critics explain that in Gnostic myth there is one supreme, immaculate god, and a number of “less divine” beings, who live in a sphere similar to heaven, the *pleroma*. According to myth, these beings, who are

⁴⁰ Flannery-Dailey and Wagner explain that “this corpus lay dormant for nearly 2000 years until its discovery in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt,” and they also acknowledge that these “Gnostic texts are cryptic, and no single text clearly explains this myth from beginning to end” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.). “It is clear,” they write, “that Gnostic Christianity flourished from at least the 2nd-5th century C.E....with its own distinctive rituals” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.).

also referred to as “aeons,”⁴¹ are capable of reproduction, if the male and female copulate. At some point in history, however, the aeon called Sophia made the fateful decision to single-handedly give birth to a divine being, reportedly named Yaldaboath. As a result of her evil deed, Yaldaboath is born malformed. He is a thoroughly ignorant and cruel deity, who mistakes himself for the only existing God, and therefore decides to create the earth, the angels, and human beings. Legend has it that Yaldaboath unknowingly passed on his divine qualities, which he inherited from his mother, to the human beings he created. For this reason, humanity is doomed to suffering, as humans are, to a certain extent, divine beings trapped in an evil surrounding (cf. Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.).

“To a significant degree,” the critics argue, “the basic Gnostic myth parallels the plot of *The Matrix*” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.). The human race in the film is likened to the extremely proud and conceited Sophia. As Morpheus tells Neo, “at some point, in the early 21st century, all of mankind was united in celebration. Through the binding inebriation of hubris, we marveled at our magnificence as we gave birth to AI” (Wachowski, 40). Thus, similar to this female Gnostic aeon, humans also produced “offspring,” because they felt it was their sole and inherent right to do so. Subsequently, Flannery-Dailey and Wagner compare the Creator God Yaldaboath to the AI—described as a “singular consciousness that spawned an entire race of machines” (Wachowski, 40). Similar to Yaldaboath, who created the illusory material world for human beings to live in, the AI created the Matrix to trap humankind in a “prison for their minds.” Moreover, there are parallels between the AI’s Agents, who are described as the Matrix’s “gatekeepers, guarding all the doors, holding all the keys” (Wachowski, 54), and the Creator God’s angels, who, in a similar manner, guard the gates to the Gnostic heaven (cf. Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.).

There is, fortunately, a way to heaven and out of the seemingly perennial human dilemma. As Flannery-Dailey and Wagner point out, “salvation is

⁴¹ It is interesting that Neo is not only an anagram of “one,” but also of “eon,” which is an alternative spelling for “aeon.” The word “aeon” also signifies a “power existing from eternity,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, or “an emanation, generation, or phase of the supreme deity, taking part in the creation and government of the universe” (OED, s.v. aeon). Aylish Wood, for instance, argues that Neo “introduces a new eon, a period when control is open to contestation” (Wood, 129).

available in the form of *gnosis* or knowledge imparted by a Gnostic redeemer, who is Christ, a figure sent from the higher God” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.). The *gnosis* implies a profound understanding of human nature, as well as the keen awareness of humanity’s enslavement in a material body and a material realm. The Gnostic can only ascend and escape to heaven, by overcoming insuperable obstacles, i.e. Yaldaboath’s jealous angels. For Flannery-Dailey and Wagner it is quite apparent that *The Matrix* and Neo’s character clearly echo the Gnostic myth. They argue that Neo is “saved” through gnosis, which was partly passed on to him by Morpheus, who teaches him “about the true structure of reality and about his own true identity” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.). Other critics, however, claim that there is a major problem with interpreting *The Matrix* as Gnostic, since Neo himself is “never shown passing his gnosis onto anyone else” (Fielding, n.p.). Moreover, it is argued that Neo is quite reticent about the information he receives from the Oracle, for instance, as he only tells the others what is necessary; hence, “[h]e is not a teacher, as Morpheus is” (Fielding, n.p.).

This criticism notwithstanding, Flannery-Dailey and Wagner stick to their analysis, and they indicate that Neo’s gnosis is fully displayed in the final scene during the battle against Agent Smith. As Flannery-Dailey and Wagner argue, “[b]oth the film and the Gnostics assert that the ‘divine spark’ within humans allows a perception of gnosis greater than that achievable by even the chief [angel] of Yaldaboath” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.). Indeed, Agent Smith, for instance, seemed previously invincible and indestructible. Once Neo has finally realized the perfect illusion of the Matrix, there is nothing that can stop him anymore from breaking all the rules that govern the simulated realm. He can enter Smith’s body and consequently split him into pieces, “by means of pure luminosity,” which is said to symbolize *gnosis* or infinite knowledge (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.).

3.3. Is Neo the Buddha?

Buddhist scholar James L. Ford is the author of two very influential articles on the influence of Christianity and Buddhism on *The Matrix*. Other critics, who write about the film's religious themes, often cite his work, as he is renowned for his clear style and insights about complex theological issues. The relationship between Buddhism and the Wachowskis' film is indeed a complex one, as Ford argues in "Buddhism, Mythology, and *The Matrix*." Even though many commentators are quick to identify Neo with Jesus Christ, Ford suggests that a comparison to the founder of Buddhism, Siddhārtha Gautama, would actually be more apt. As Ford further explains, only upon achieving enlightenment, Siddhārtha earned the title of the Buddha, meaning "the awakened one" (cf. Ford, 127). Indeed, numerous times during the film it is implied that Neo needs to be "awakened," before he can follow the path of the resistance fight as "the One." At the very beginning, Trinity's computer-message literally urges him to "wake up," and later Morpheus calls the Matrix a "dreamworld," from which Neo is hoping and "expecting to wake up" (Wachowski, 28). Also, after Neo is released from his Matrix-pod and treated on Morpheus' ship, he asks Morpheus why his eyes hurt—the answer is terrifying, since Morpheus replies, "you've never used them before" (Wachowski, 36). However, being unplugged from the Matrix and witnessing human enslavement by the machines, does not yet make Neo the "awakened one."

In the underlying article, Ford starts with a succinct introduction to Buddhism, explaining some of the fundamental concepts, which are useful for an analysis of *The Matrix*. He recounts how Siddhārtha became "the awakened one" by finding a way to escape from *samsāra*, which represents the endless cycle of life and suffering. In order to achieve *mokshā*, that is, liberation from this cycle, it was necessary to "renounce the world and pursue the path of a...wandering ascetic" (Ford, 128). After years of wandering, Siddhārtha finally encountered Mara, the demon god that rules *samsāra*, and he attained ultimate enlightenment by prevailing over Mara (cf. Ford, 128). At this point, we should recall the scene in which Morpheus explains to Neo how the machines govern the world. In the future, life on our planet is presented to him, and to the audience, as an endless cycle of horror—human beings

are grown in pods, their bio-energy is harvested, while they are plugged into the Matrix, and after they die, their remains are liquefied and fed to the living babies. *The Matrix* is a veritable vicious cycle that every human would want to leave behind, but only “the One” has the capability to fight that system and liberate others.

Similarly, Siddhārtha had to overcome the demon god’s manipulations and temptations, before he could embark on his new path as the Buddha and teach others about how to “wake up” and escape suffering. Yet another crucial Buddhist element in the film is the allusion to reincarnation. For instance, during a conversation with Neo, Morpheus explains to him that he is not the first messiah, because

when the Matrix was first built there was a man born inside that had the ability to change what he wanted, to remake the Matrix as he saw fit...when he died, the Oracle prophesied his return and envisioned that his coming would hail the destruction of the Matrix, an end to the war and freedom for our people. (Wachowski, 44)

Later, when Neo meets the Oracle, she implies that he is not the “One,” but adds mysteriously that he is perhaps waiting for his “next life” (Wachowski, 73).

Moreover, Neo is characterized as someone, who is extremely plagued by feeling that something is profoundly “wrong” with the world, and he keeps looking for an answer to the question burning on his mind—what is the Matrix? Correspondingly, Siddhartha must have felt the same, as he was, too, looking for answers to his concerns about how it was possible to overcome suffering and death. Therefore, he abandoned his “old” life of a wealthy prince and embarked on his search for enlightenment. In the film, it is also suggested a few times that Thomas Anderson must leave his ordinary life behind. First, his boss Mr. Rhineheart gives him a severe reprimand about being late, and tells him that “the time has come to make a choice, Mr. Anderson” (Wachowski, 15). Either, he is on time from now on, or he should look for another job—his “new” job, as it turns out later, will be to save the world. Also, after Neo is contacted by Morpheus, he is detained and questioned by Agent Smith. Smith is more direct and tells him that they know about his two lives—“in one life you are Thomas A. Anderson, program writer for a respectable software company...the other life is lived in computers where you go by the hacker alias Neo” (Wachowski, 20). This is the moment

when the audience realizes that Neo's story is about to take on a radically new direction. Smith puts it clearly, "one of these lives has a future. One of them does not" (Wachowski, 20).

3.3.1. The Buddhist Point of View

The crucial choice Neo has to make, is between the red and the blue pill that Morpheus offers him. If he opts for the red pill, Morpheus promises to show him the truth, so Neo can see for himself that his suspicions and doubts were not hallucinations. "What you know you can't explain but you feel it. You've felt it your whole life, felt that something is wrong with the world," Morpheus says, "you don't know what, but it's there like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad" (Wachowski, 28). That is, in fact, precisely what the Buddha described as *dukkha* in his basic teachings, as James Ford explains. Thus, *dukkha* can be seen as the idea that there is "a universal feeling of dissatisfaction that characterizes all of human consciousness" (Ford, 129). The reason for this seemingly gloomy or morose Buddhist worldview is the fact that humans are said to have a completely distorted perception of the world they live in (cf. Ford, 129). Hence, Morpheus' speech about the Matrix as being "the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth" (Wachowski, 29), fits very well into the Buddhist conception of life.

Therefore, Ford claims that one of the most important things to consider, when analyzing Buddhist tropes in *The Matrix*, is that Buddhism is a "philosophy of the mind" (Ford, 134). Ford elucidates that, for Buddhists, "the fundamental problem is not 'of the world,'" instead, the main problem is "the way we perceive the world" (Ford, 134). As a result, Buddhism does not view the world in terms of good and evil, as it is –arguably– represented in *The Matrix*. However, as Buddhism is not a thoroughly pessimistic religion, there is a way out of this perpetual delusion and the solution "is rooted in a transformation of one's consciousness and the way one processes reality" (Ford, 124)—in other words, "free your mind." That is precisely what Neo needs to learn, if he wants to fight the agents and destroy the Matrix. Other critics, such as Michael Brannigan, agree with Ford on this issue.

Brannigan cites the scene in the Oracle's apartment as the most striking parallel to Buddhism, since we can see a group of so-called "Potentials,"

sitting in the Oracle's living room, waiting to be introduced to her. One of those potentials is a small boy, seated in a "full lotus posture, garbed as a Buddhist monk, [who] telekinetically bends spoons" (Brannigan, 102). Neo is rather bewildered at the sight of the boy who tells him not to "try to bend the spoon. That is impossible. Instead, only try to realize the truth" (Wachowski, 70). Brannigan argues that it is the boy, who teaches Neo his most important lesson, that "there is no spoon" (102). The boy explains that only then "you will see that it is not the spoon that bends. It is yourself" (Wachowski, 70). Brannigan claims that the Buddhist message in this scene is quite clear, "since there is no spoon...[t]here is only mind" (103), and Neo's most difficult task is to realize the truth about the Matrix—it is a consummate deception of the mind. As Brannigan further illuminates the parallels to Buddhism, he points out that "the Buddha teaches us that the world as we know it is an illusion" (103).

Moreover, Ford argues that Morpheus is trying to teach Neo the basics of the Buddhist school known as Yogācāra (cf. Ford, 135). This becomes quite apparent, especially during the training sequence, which shows Neo and Morpheus fighting each other in the manner of true kung-fu masters. Morpheus, however, is much faster and stronger than Neo, at first, which is mainly attributed to Neo's prevailing self-doubts, fear, and insecurity. We are led to believe that it is his mind that does not allow him to perform better. Therefore, Morpheus tries to motivate Neo, telling him to "let it all go. Fear. Doubt. Disbelief. Free your mind" (Wachowski, 50). For some critics, such as Slavoj Žižek, however, this kind of dialogue is simply a "clunky...pseudo-sophisticated...philosophical reference to Eastern techniques of emptying your mind as the way to escape the Matrix" (Žižek, "*The Matrix*," 240).

Buddhist scholar James Ford, on the other hand, does not scorn the Wachowski brothers for including such a speech in the film. On the contrary, he argues that Morpheus' advice to Neo corresponds well with Yogācāra teachings, which say that "once we realize that the objects of consciousness are, in this sense, illusory, then desire, attachment, and suffering cease" (Ford, 135). In order to "free one's mind," and learn to detach from the deluded material world, the Yogācāra school emphasizes the importance of various meditation techniques, which can lead to the path of enlightenment.

Ford argues that Neo's training is "a wonderful analogy of this decidedly 'mental' transformation process" that Buddhist monks have to go through (Ford, 137). Further, he points out the Wachowskis' sensitivity to enrich the film with martial arts training, for it has "historically close ties with Buddhist monastic training in China and Japan" (Ford, 138). Another subtle similarity to the life of Buddhist monks, as Ford highlights, is certainly the intention to "pursue enlightenment for the benefit of all beings" (Ford, 138). Those on Morpheus' ship, who opted for the red pill and the "truth," have committed themselves to liberating the rest of humanity, and they willingly put up with an obviously ascetic and monastic life—the food, the clothes, and the rooms on the *Nebuchadnezzar* are everything but luxurious.

The Wachowskis brothers have taken the Buddhist conception of a completely distorted worldview to its limits, by suggesting that all humans are, in fact, "slaves," as Morpheus puts it. He says that, like everyone else on the planet, Neo was "born into bondage, kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison for your mind" (Wachowski, 28). As Ford indicates, this aspect of the story highlights the parallels to Yogācāra philosophy most appropriately (cf. Ford 138). Further, he explains that "Yogācāra emphasizes that our *only* access to reality is through our conscious minds" (138), and therefore, all our experiences are inevitably distorted by our consciousness. Ford compares that particular "filtering" process to a perfect illusion, similar to the Matrix. "It is as though one's mind is a movie projector," he writes, "and the world that one experiences is the 'projection' of one's consciousness" (Ford, 135). Morpheus points to the intricacies of such a powerful illusion, or delusion, when he asks Neo, "what is real? How do you define real? If you're talking about what you feel, taste, smell, or see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain" (Wachowski, 39).

However, Morpheus strongly believes that Neo is the "One," who will bring about the destruction of the Matrix and its dreamworld, and finally reveal the truth to the rest of humanity—which is precisely what the Buddha did. Upon achieving enlightenment and defying the demon god's threats, he went out and taught others about his gained insights. Another striking similarity between Neo and the Buddha is their ability to manipulate the Matrix and the

perceived “objective” world, respectively, after having become the “awakened ones.” Ford points out that the Buddha can “transform...objects at will...and possesses the power to create his/her own cosmic realm” (Ford, 139). After Neo fully realizes his status as the “One,” he can do whatever he wants inside the Matrix—nothing seems impossible any longer, and no rules apply to him anymore. However, at the end of the film it seems that Neo is not very keen on annihilating the Matrix. Rather, it appears as if he acts in a very similar fashion to the founder of Buddhism, who refrained from radically changing the world, as well. As Ford emphasizes, the Buddha simply offered people “a new path and way of overcoming our distorted perception of the world” (Ford, 139). He did not deem it necessary to destroy the demon-god Mara during their encounter. It seems that, both Neo and the Buddha, see their mission in revealing the truth to those who will listen, so they can also find a way out of the “cycle of suffering,” called Matrix or *samsara*.

The scene that shows Neo stopping bullets and effortlessly defeating the seemingly indestructible Agent Smith, is the ultimate proof that he has become “the One.” As Ford argues, “no longer constrained by fear, doubt, or ignorance, Neo, like a Buddha, has transcended all dualities, even the ultimate duality of life and death” (Ford, 140).

3.4. The Truth about *The Matrix*?

In his article “Reassessing *The Matrix/Reloaded*,” Julien Fielding claims that he is the only scholar who really understands *The Matrix*, and the only critic, who knows how the Wachowski brothers seemingly misled so many religious scholars, who “have thrown their hats into the academic ring, expounding on the Gnostic, Buddhist, and Christian aspects found therein” (Fielding, n.p.).

Fielding harshly criticizes his colleagues for imposing “a singular religious paradigm on top of the film, slotting in the characters one-by-one,” and thus simply trying to employ on religious worldview, in order to make sense of *The Matrix* (Fielding, n.p.). This is not the key to understanding the complex religious symbols, and Fielding vows that “[his] paper will demonstrate why” (Fielding, n.p.).

Understandably, readers have high expectations for Fielding's article and his solutions to the seemingly impossible task of unraveling the religious intricacies of the film's plot. Fielding acknowledges in a rather patronizing tone that it is not surprising that a number of critics have turned to the Bible, in order to understand *The Matrix*, for "the basics seem to be there" (Fielding, n.p.). Similarly, other scholars have looked to Buddhist traditions and therefore compared Neo to the Buddha, while yet other critics see Neo as the Gnostic redeemer figure, who comes to save the world. Fielding also acknowledges that "evidence in the film supports" such analyses to a certain extent, but all of these approaches "are far from decoding *The Matrix*" (Fielding, n.p.). Most critics have apparently overlooked the fact that Christianity, Buddhism, as well as Gnosticism share their "negative attitudes toward the physical body" (Fielding, n.p.).

Fielding cites crucial passages from the Bible that prove his point about Christianity's rejection of the body, or, the flesh. Among others, Fielding cites from St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, in which Paul writes, "walk in the spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh, for the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh" (Gal. 5:16-17). Further, when it comes to Siddhārtha's attitude towards the "flesh" and sensual pleasure, Fielding argues that "at the core of his teachings is the fact that...craving or desire...[is] the root of suffering" (Fielding, n.p.). Finally, the Gnostics are described as "dualists who had a revulsion of the human body. To them the spirit was everything" (Fielding, n.p.). Hence, Fielding argues that *The Matrix* cannot be brought into accordance with any of these religions, for the glaring contradictions between the film's message and the religious doctrines are irreconcilable.

Fielding points out that Neo, as well as the rest of the crew, may have accepted a largely ascetic, but not strictly celibate, life—unlike the divine saviors, such as Jesus or the Buddha. The fact that Trinity confesses her love to Neo while he is momentarily dead, as well as her life-saving kiss definitely hint at a future love-relationship that is "far from a Platonic ideal" (Fielding, n.p.). Furthermore, there are a number of ambivalent messages in the film, which, on the one hand, seem to propagate a celibate life, but on the other hand, Neo's character and his fate appear to prove such conservative

views about “desire” and “sensual pleasure” wrong. Fielding draws attention to Cypher, the alleged Judas-figure, who proclaims confidently that “ignorance is bliss” (Wachowski, 62), and therefore urges Agent Smith to reinsert him into the Matrix. In exchange for Morpheus’ life, the Agent promises Cypher to provide him with a new identity in the Matrix, to which the traitor famously replies, “I want to be rich. Someone important. Like an actor” (Wachowski, 62). Fielding criticizes those scholars who immediately label Cypher as the ultimate villain, because he willingly “embraces the sensual world and its distractions” (Fielding, n.p.).

It is suggested that Cypher is immoral and evil, simply because he enjoys the simulated steak, cigar, and wine. Fielding emphasizes, however, that the Wachowskis have also included a very intriguing scene, during which the programmer Mouse gives an impassioned speech about the importance of sensual pleasure. While the crew has gathered to have supper—a bowl of “a single-celled protein combined with synthetic aminos, vitamins, and minerals” (Wachowski, 63)—Mouse expresses his disappointment with life on the *Nebuchadnezzar*. Whereas Dozer claims that the food contains “everything your body needs,” Mouse profoundly disagrees with him, exclaiming, “oh no, it doesn’t” (Wachowski, 63). Moreover, he offers Neo a meeting with the “beautiful woman in the red dress,” who was designed by Mouse for the Agent training program.

During that particular training sequence, Neo is supposed to learn how to focus all his attention on the Agents, while he is jacked into the Matrix, for every “human being” inside the Matrix who has not been unplugged yet, is potentially an Agent. As Morpheus explains, “inside the Matrix they are everyone and they are no one” (Wachowski, 54). The woman in the red dress is presented as a threat, a *femme fatale*, and therefore extremely dangerous, because she has the potential to distract Neo from his mission. Indeed, as she smiles at him seductively, Neo turns around and does not even listen to Morpheus’ words anymore. Hence, the lesson to be learned is not to let one’s impulses take advantage of the rational mind. During the supper-scene, Mouse explains to Neo that he could “arrange a more personalized milieu,” in case Neo wants to get to know her a little better (Wachowski, 63). The others laugh deprecatorily at Mouse’s suggestion, calling him a “digital pimp,” but

the young programmer is not impressed by their comments. He says, “pay no attention to these hypocrites, Neo. To deny our impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human” (Wachowski, 63). Fielding argues that Mouse is not only referring to the seductive woman in red, but all those things “that give a person pleasure” (Fielding, n.p.).

Again, it is difficult to decipher, whether the Wachowskis are suggesting that Cypher and Mouse are mistaken in their views. It is worth noting, perhaps, that both of them die in the course of the film, which might be interpreted as punishment for their “sinful” thoughts and behavior. Before he manages to unplug and kill Neo, Cypher is suddenly killed by Tank. Mouse, on the other hand, dies a more heroic death in the Hotel Lafayette, crushed by Agents. When Neo first inquired Morpheus about re-entering the Matrix, he expressed worries about receiving serious injuries in the virtual world. “If you are killed in the Matrix,” he asks, “do you die here?” (Wachowski, 52). Morpheus’ response is immediate and unequivocal, “the body cannot live without the mind” (Wachowski, 52). It seems as if this statement proves Fielding’s point that the Wachowskis do not favor a clear distinction between body and mind/spirit. Therefore, any analysis according to Christian/Buddhist/Gnostic doctrines, which are said to demonize the body/flesh, is apparently doomed to failure.

Fielding is convinced that he emerges victorious after this academic battle, since he has demonstrated that “no one religious worldview helps to connect the dots...and [does] not always offer the truest interpretations,” in order to understand the Wachowski brothers’ film (Fielding, n.p.). Consequently, it seems quite peculiar -and rather ironic, in fact- when Fielding proposes that applying Hinduism to *The Matrix* would be the best way to fully comprehend the film. In the last two paragraphs of his article, Fielding explains briefly that Hinduism might account for the fact that Neo maintains a relationship with Trinity—despite his status as the savior. Fielding mentions that “as in Greek tradition, Hindu deities typically have a consort,” contrary to Christian or Buddhist belief, where Jesus and the Buddha live alone (Fielding, n.p.). Moreover, Trinity’s emancipated role in the narrative could be easily compared to a powerful goddess in Hinduism, and Fielding points out that “unlike the majority of ‘orthodox’ religions,” Hinduism cherishes strong and

mighty female deities (Fielding, n.p.). Finally, however, Fielding seems to have become aware of his own theoretical and theological obfuscation. In conclusion, he writes, “although Hinduism elucidates some elements in *The Matrix*, it is also far from the perfect key” (Fielding, n.p.).

3.5. Where is God?

There is still another pertinent issue that needs to be resolved, when it comes to the religious *Matrix*, and that is the question about God’s presence or absence. As for God’s role in the film, opinions also differ enormously. Flannery-Dailey and Wagner suggest that Neo’s transformation into sheer light at the end might be interpreted as either a “symbol for divinity, or for human potential” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, n.p.). Finding God in *The Matrix* is not an easy task, as there seems to be no God in the film in the first place. For this reason, Conrad Ostwalt argues in his article, “Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn,” that the divine is thoroughly absent from *The Matrix*, because it is implied that both the enslavement and the possible liberation from bondage are of human making (cf. Ostwalt, n.p.). Likewise, James Ford argues that the existential problem human beings face in *The Matrix* does not adequately reflect the religious foundation myth of both Judaism and Christianity. The fundamental problem for those two religions is the “alienation from God due to our sinful nature and tendency toward trying to be like God” (Ford, “Myth-Making,” n.p.). Ford claims that “a personal creator God is nowhere present in the story,” and therefore he proposes that an analysis of the film from a Buddhist perspective would be most appropriate (Ford, “Myth-Making,” n.p.).

Paul Fontana, however, insists that *The Matrix* can be interpreted as “modern” adaptation of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic scenario. He argues that God is not absent from the film, even though God is never mentioned and “no character in the movie can be allegorized as God” (Fontana, 176). Nevertheless, critics have tried to align certain characters with God and attribute them with divine qualities. Flannery-Dailey and Wagner suggest that “the film does open up the possibility of a God through the figure of the Oracle,” since it is implied that she has “access to information about the future that even those free from the Matrix do not possess” (Flannery-Dailey

and Wagner, n.p.). The self-proclaimed sage critic, the “One” among the scholars, Julien Fielding posits that Trinity might, in fact, be God. Fielding points out that Trinity is “the divine spark that resurrects Neo...it also is her love that transforms him” from Doubting Thomas (Anderson) into Neo, the invincible Messiah (Fielding, n.p.).

Even Fontana is forced to admit that Trinity’s part in the “Gospel of Neo” is quite substantial. If we consider that Neo comes back to life as a result of Trinity’s power, i.e. her love for him, then “she would have to be allegorized as God” (Fontana, 169). This theory is not quite as far-fetched, since her name is “overtly theistic,” unlike all the other characters in *The Matrix* (Fontana, 169). Furthermore, Fielding notes an interesting detail about Trinity’s status in the ship’s hierarchy, as she makes clear to Neo that she “outranks [him] and even refuses to let him single-handedly rescue Morpheus” (Fielding, n.p.). We might infer from this circumstance that only God *herself* could be above the Messiah. Moreover, Fielding emphasizes that Trinity “watches over Neo and on several occasions seems to be directing his actions” (Fielding, n.p.). The same, however, could be said about Morpheus. He treats Neo during his recovery on the ship, and after all, he is the captain of the hovercraft. In addition to that, Morpheus is often described as a father figure for the other crew-members. Tank tells the seemingly dying Morpheus, “you were more than our leader. You were...a father” (Wachowski, 98). This, in turn, would link Morpheus to God, who Christians also refer to as the “Father.”

Fontana strongly advocates the claim that *The Matrix* qualifies as a religious movie, since God is indirectly present in the narrative. Fontana points out that the Wachowskis have meticulously crafted an allegorical model, which would become completely meaningless if there were no God, and the idea of a messiah would also become obsolete (cf. 177). In all likelihood, the notion of God in the film might be compared to the Judeo-Christian God figure who is intangible, yet transcendent and “active in the affairs of human history and the economy of salvation” (Fontana, 177). Likewise, Flannery-Dailey and Wagner argue that, in case there is an “implied divinity” in *The Matrix*, it certainly resembles “the divinity of the ineffable, invisible supreme god in Gnosticism” (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner,

n.p.). Fontana admits that the film seems “free from theistic reference of any kind,” and yet he argues that it is possible to find evidence for God’s presence, “by carefully observing the film’s plot” (Fontana, 177).

Paul Fontana suggests that people in the year 2199 have come to the conclusion that God must be dead; otherwise he would have helped them. God has probably been absent during the last two hundred years, while humanity had to face an existence in exile and slavery. Fontana proposes that “[f]or Morpheus’ crew living in the year 2199, God was a belief of people long ago, and these people must have been wrong” (Fontana, 178). However, towards the end of the film, Fontana argues, “in a subtle way, God reappears [and] the script provides us with all the clues,” in order to realize that God has finally returned (178). Fontana explicitly points towards the scene, during which the narrative reaches its tentative climax. He argues that, “as Cypher is about to wipe out what is left of the human race by turning over Zion, God returns to the drama” (Fontana, 178). Cypher has already pulled the plug on Apoc and Switch, which means that he has killed them in cold blood. Neo is supposed to be the next victim, and Cypher tells Trinity over the radio, “if Neo is the One, then in the next few seconds there has to be some kind of miracle to stop me” (Wachowski, 89). Indeed, we witness a *deus ex machina* moment, as the seemingly dead Tank gets up, “charred and bloody,” in order to eliminate Cypher (Wachowski, 90). Afterwards, back on the ship, Trinity and Neo are preparing themselves to go back into the Matrix to rescue Morpheus. His voice heavy with irony, Tank asks, “what do you need? Besides a miracle...” (Wachowski, 98). Even though the people in *The Matrix* seem to be thoroughly atheistic, since there is never a single mention of God or divine interference, Fontana argues that “without God acting in the wings, it is impossible to explain Neo’s resurrection and the other miraculous events in of the film” (Fontana, 179).

Contrary to Fontana’s opinion, Gregory Bassham claims that the denial of a personal god is quite apparent in the film, “which has a definite emphasis on the spiritual yet no reference to the divine” (Bassham, 118). Further, Bassham argues that *The Matrix* neither specifically endorses Christianity, nor any other world religion for that matter. He supports the converse argument that the film is a good example of “religious pluralism,” or “Neo-

pluralism,” which can be described as reflecting the view that “many or all religions are equally valid or true” (Bassham, 111). Hence, religious truth is said to lie in a happy mix of beliefs drawn from a number of different world religions. Bassham writes that many viewers are very likely to be tempted by this “patchwork of various religions and spiritual traditions” (Bassham, 116). Even though people might find such a vision quite attractive and have a positive attitude towards religious pluralism as depicted in the film, a closer analysis reveals that such views are incorrect and implausible (cf. Bassham, 112).

Bassham explains that a corresponding mix of beliefs may seem rather appealing at first, it is hard to unite various – and significantly differing – religious doctrines in a sound framework that would be reasonable. Most importantly, however, it would be extremely difficult to account for the validity of religious pluralism, since “few, if any, specific religious doctrines can be rationally justified without appeal, ultimately, to divine revelation” (Bassham, 119). If, as Bassham argues, the religion of *The Matrix* is presumably nontheistic, “it is hard to see how any such [divine] appeal could succeed” (119). Consequently, the Wachowski brothers’ “Neo-pluralism,” as shown in the film, may work reasonably well as a tool for myth-making, and it might also reflect a fashionable view of religion. Ultimately, however, it is “very difficult to make sense of, or to defend” (Bassham, 125).

On the one hand, Gregory Bassham also clearly criticizes religious exclusivists, who are convinced that only one – usually their own – religion knows the Truth, while all other religions are completely mistaken in their perception and understanding of the world. Therefore, he rejects the type of criticism that analyzes *The Matrix* through the lens of only one religion, such as Christianity or Buddhism. On the other hand, he emphasizes the fact that religious pluralists themselves, tend to behave in a similarly arrogant manner, when they condemn exclusivists for their egotism, chauvinism, or oppressive attitude. As a result, the Wachowski brothers themselves can be described as intellectually arrogant, if they create a story in which ideas from various world religions are scattered all over the narrative, instead of promoting only one set of beliefs, such as Buddhism, for instance (cf. Bassham, 124). Hence, from reading Bassham’s article, it becomes obvious that he has

steered his own analysis into a theoretical dead end, which is seemingly not leading anywhere. Thus, however, he appropriately reflects the critics' problems and difficulties with lucidly analyzing, interpreting, and making sense of the Wachowski brothers' film *The Matrix*.

Conclusion

The Matrix is everywhere, it is all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out of your window or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

—Morpheus, *The Matrix*

The question as to what the Matrix is might have been answered—it is a means of control, a perfect form of deception. The other question, however, as to what *The Matrix* is, turns out to be more complex than previously assumed. It has been widely acknowledged that *The Matrix* is the type of film that enjoys cult status on both sides of the critical spectrum—on the one hand, avid fans have filled thousands of websites on the internet with discussions of the intricate plot, whereas scholars, on the other hand, have devoted arguably as much time and energy to analyzing the philosophic or religious themes treated in the film in scholarly journals and books. These collective efforts notwithstanding, it seems virtually impossible to decode *The Matrix* and peel away all the layers of hidden meanings found in it, as I have argued in my thesis.

The only thing most critics would agree on is that *The Matrix* owes its immense success within academic circles to the fact that it conspicuously flirts with postmodern critical theory and therefore attracts scholarly attention. Moreover, the film itself has been described –either favorably or condescendingly– as a typical product of a postmodern “culture of quotations” (Storey, 138), for *The Matrix* is full of intertextual allusions to various science-fiction classics from the past, or obvious references to well-known fairy tales, for instance. Most importantly, however, the Wachowski brothers rejoiced in including different philosophical ideas, as well as controversial postmodern theories in their film, and on top of that, they also offered an intriguing and eclectic approach to spirituality and religion.

In my thesis, I have focused on the burning issues that had stirred the most heated academic debates surrounding *The Matrix*, which are posthuman conceptions of subjectivity, the notion of hyperreality as presented in the film, and the filmmakers’ arguably postmodern, eclectic take on religion. A detailed discussion of selected articles published about

The Matrix has shown that the Wachowski brothers' film seems to entail a number of contradictions, which have been meticulously pointed out and dissected by the critics. At the same time, however, my analysis of the underlying critical material has also revealed that there are obvious inconsistencies in the critics' own publications to be detected—a circumstance that has, in turn, led to what I have called a “scholarly war of words.” Since the film's release in 1999, scholars are said to have “thrown their hats into the academic ring” (Fielding, n.p.), trying to expose previous analyses and interpretations as insufficient or simply wrong, while claiming that their article or book offers the essential decoding of *The Matrix*.

The reason why the film continues to be vividly debated, even years after its debut at the box-office, is that it deliberately avoids being neatly categorized and classified—and yet that is precisely what a majority of the critics are attempting to achieve. As I have proposed, these efforts have resulted in an incessant arguing about, and criticizing of, each other's articles and ideological positions, during a quest for the ultimate “truth” about *The Matrix*. Moreover, each article that has been discussed in the underlying study has insisted on placing the film in a theoretical or theological pigeonhole, by finding evidence in the narrative that supports the critic's invariable standpoint and line of argumentation. As a consequence, much of the published material fails to critically judge the film's overall message, which is, by contrast, an enthusiastic plea for diversity.

In the first section, which focuses on the complex representations of postmodern subjectivity in *The Matrix*, it has been demonstrated how the filmic narrative works on different levels, in order to provoke an ambivalent reaction towards technological advancement from the audience. The viewer is constantly forced to measure the advantages of cyborg existence against potential dangers that a posthuman future might bring. However, it appears as if some critics have had difficulties in keeping up with the multiple standpoints that are presented in *The Matrix*, which becomes particularly obvious in their narrow-minded and partial approaches to complex issues, such as posthuman subjectivity. A typical reading of *The Matrix* often amounts to nothing more but harsh criticism of the film's allegedly negative portrayal of futuristic cyborgs, owing to the filmmakers' supposed

sympathizing with liberal-humanist ideas. As I have further argued, an account of the posthuman subjects in the film is by all means insufficient, if the crucial issue of overcoming gender-binaries by the use of cyborg-imagery is completely and unabashedly neglected. The omission is surprising and even provocative, if it is considered that the posthuman subjects in *The Matrix* have been endued with highly ambivalent characteristics, which contribute to destabilizing fixed gender roles that are often taken for granted in mainstream action films. Conversely, critics who emphasize the subversive potential of *The Matrix*, owing to the portrayal of ambiguously gendered protagonists, often fail to analyze in how far this circumstance might not only disrupt conservative notions of gender identities, but also challenge the tenets of a patriarchal capitalist film industry that insists on the representation of a heroic male figure to ensure the film's profits.

The second chapter, which discusses the significance and accuracy of Jean Baudrillard's overt inclusion in the narrative, served to underline the aforementioned point that critics tend to shift their interests from an in-depth analysis of *The Matrix* to a painstaking analysis of their colleagues' publications on the film. As has been shown, most scholars, who respond to *The Matrix*'s allusions to hyperreality in their essays, either take the position that Baudrillard's theories are extremely useful, or wholly fallacious. For that reason, however, an interpretation of the film itself threatens to fade into the background, and the major issue that is discussed is whether the Wachowskis themselves "understand" Baudrillard, or not. Moreover, in various articles that have been analyzed, it turns out to be of greater importance to the critic to assure his or her position as an expert on Baudrillard's theories, rather than to offer a lucid account of how the concept of hyperreality functions in *The Matrix*.

It is often the case, as I have argued, that academic critics devote more space to rectifying other scholars' opinions that are contrary to their own, instead of focusing on the film. Hence, it is disappointing to find that only few articles deal with the theory of simulation in detail and analyze in how far it is successfully incorporated into the narrative. In contrast, those scholars, who generally denounce postmodern critical theory, do not provide helpful information to the reader either. They use *The Matrix* merely as a pretext to

rail against the French theorist and those critics who employ his ideas to decode the film. My analysis of the selected articles has revealed that most publications about Baudrillard's influence on the film are, in fact, counterproductive when it comes to interpreting *The Matrix* comprehensively and objectively. It is highly questionable whether the critics who are simply determined to bring to light the intellectual shortcomings of the Wachowski brothers' script, are offering indispensable and reasonable contributions to the underlying debate. Instead of dismissing the filmmakers as superficial and attacking them for having "hi-jacked" and misused Baudrillard's theories for a capitalist Hollywood project, it would be more useful to undertake a reading of *The Matrix* that remains critically profound without being partial and judgmental, when it comes to the French theorist's ideas.

The third and final section aptly exemplifies the problems inherent in much of the published critical material about *The Matrix*, which have already been discussed in the first two chapters. Those articles that simply approach the film's religious imagery from a rather restrictive standpoint clearly fail to offer an accurate account of *The Matrix*'s elaborate theological vision. It is inadequate to analyze solely the Christian or Buddhist elements, for instance, and draw hasty conclusions from those hints that are presented in the narrative. The film needs to be scrutinized from a variety of perspectives, and such an analysis ought not to be limited to the examination of a single religion. Moreover, it does not further the debate, if scholars keep trying to solve the religious riddle by discovering new references to other belief systems, such as Gnosticism, in order to avoid a mention of the more obvious Christian or Buddhist motifs in the film. The theological debate eventually boils down to a fight between scholars, who presuppose that there is one correct reading of the religious themes in *The Matrix* and who insist on labeling the film as either exclusively Christian, Buddhist, or Gnostic. Unfortunately, the voices that harshly condemn this kind of criticism do not succeed in offering a more articulate account of the matters at hand either. Instead of making ground-breaking suggestions, those scholars propose to apply yet another religion, such as Hinduism, to *The Matrix*, or they simply argue that the pluralistic vision of religion as represented in the film is a complete failure in the first place.

As I have argued, a comprehensive analysis and reasonable interpretation of *The Matrix* is not conceivable, if the scholar approaches the film from exclusively one vantage point. Such an attitude on part of the critic is particularly misleading and counterproductive, since this film is replete with allusions to different philosophies and word religions, and the viewer is confronted with new theoretical twists at almost every turn during the narrative. Needless to say, the Wachowski brothers' film offers a wide range of possible readings, and yet, there are still critics who insist on producing one essay that supposedly presents the only accurate reading of *The Matrix* and contains the answer to all the questions raised in it. Moreover, I have argued that a productive debate about the controversial issues treated in *The Matrix* needs to be more thorough than what we have seen so far. It is rather unsatisfactory to follow inconclusive discussions in which scholars are primarily concerned with criticizing one another and consequently almost neglect to critically evaluate the film.

In conclusion, I believe it is not constructive to insist on individually treating the crucial issues, such as subjectivity, hyperreality and religion, in relatively short articles, which are then published as essay-collections. This gives the reader the impression that those matters are also treated separately in the film, which is actually not the case. The format of the concise critical essay does not allow for a careful and detailed analysis of the many interrelated themes that are dealt with in *The Matrix*, and thus the Wachowski brothers' overarching vision of the future cannot be fully and adequately appreciated. Therefore, a book-length study that elucidates how the various subjects are meaningfully connected and interwoven in the film is definitely worth considering, for such an approach is much needed. It is regrettable that a number of critics continue to see only mainstream and conservative ideas reflected in *The Matrix*, while possibly resistant and revolutionary ways of reading it are still left unexplored.

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Zusammenfassung in deutscher Sprache

Der zweite Film der Gebrüder Wachowski hat im Jahr 1999 für großes Aufsehen gesorgt. Das science-fiction Spektakel *The Matrix*, bei dem die Brüder Andy und Larry Wachowski sowohl für das Drehbuch, als auch für die Regie zuständig waren, begeisterte das Kinopublikum mit noch nie gezeigten visuellen Effekten und atemberaubenden Stunts. Allerdings wurde auch schnell klar, dass *The Matrix* nicht nur ein besonderer Leckerbissen für eingefleischte „cyberpunk“-Fans war, sondern faszinierte auch Filmkritiker und Akademiker zugleich. Binnen kürzester Zeit erreichte der Film Kultstatus und wurde zu einem der meistdiskutierten Werke die Hollywood in den letzten zehn Jahren hervorbracht hat.

The Matrix punktet bei Kritikern und Wissenschaftlern vor allem damit, dass das Drehbuch einige Hinweise auf postmoderne kritische Theorie enthält. Die Wachowskis kokettieren teilweise offen mit besonders kontroversen Ideen, wie zum Beispiel denen des umstrittenen französischen Denkers Jean Baudrillard. Außerdem behandelt der Film die komplexe Fragestellung, inwieweit technologischer Fortschritt die Menschheit tatsächlich voranbringt beziehungsweise gefährdet. Die Zukunft erfordert die Konstruktion einer neuartigen, revolutionären Subjektivität und im Film wird die Frage nach der Identität dieses neuen Subjekts offen in die Frage gestellt. Um die Geschichte scheinbar noch komplizierter zu gestalten, schrecken Andy und Larry Wachowski auch nicht davor zurück Religion zu einem zentralen Thema in ihrem ambitionierten Werk zu machen.

In dieser Diplomarbeit habe ich es mir zum Ziel gemacht die hitzigsten Debatten die der Film *The Matrix* unter Kritikern ausgelöst hat auf das Gründlichste zu untersuchen. Der Fokus liegt dabei auf dem postmodernen Begriff von Subjektivität, Baudrillards Konzept der sogenannten Hyperrealität und schließlich dem „postmodernen“ Zugang zu Religion der im Film vermittelt wird. Eine detaillierte Analyse ausgewählter Publikationen über den Film hat ergeben, dass *The Matrix* sehr wohl einige Widersprüche enthält, die von den Verfassern dieser Artikel penibel aufgezeigt wurden. Allerdings wurde durch meine Analyse auch festgestellt, dass das vorliegende kritische Material ebenfalls nicht frei von widersprüchlichen Argumenten ist.

Dieser Umstand hat meiner Meinung nach dazu geführt, dass die Kritiker dazu übergegangen sind sich gegenseitig anzugreifen und die Urteilkraft der Kolleginnen und Kollegen öffentlich anzuzweifeln. Es kam im Laufe der Zeit immer häufiger zu regelrechten Wortgefechten in denen einander vorgeworfen wurde die Aussagen des Films völlig verklärt und komplexe Theorien à la Baudrillard vollkommen missverstanden zu haben. Seit der Veröffentlichung des Films im Frühjahr 1999 sind die Wissenschaftler unaufhörlich damit beschäftigt diese Matrix zu dekodieren und die ultimative Wahrheit über den Film darzulegen. Es fällt jedoch auf, dass jedes neue Buch und jeder publizierte Artikel sich damit rühmt, die ungelösten Rätsel des Films endlich entschlüsselt zu haben.

Auch 10 Jahre danach wird immer noch viel über *The Matrix* geschrieben und das lässt sich vor allem dadurch erklären, dass man den Film schlicht und einfach nicht in eine bestimmte theoretische Schublade stecken und nach belieben kategorisieren kann. Dennoch ist das genau der Zugang, den viele Kritiker zu diesem Werk suchen. Viele von ihnen lassen nicht locker bevor sie den Film beispielsweise als eindeutig postmodern, christlich oder buddhistisch klassifiziert haben. Dementsprechend werden somit alle anderslautenden Interpretationen als unzureichend dargestellt oder als falsch entlarvt. Diese Einstellung der Kritiker hat jedoch nicht dazu geführt, dass der Film konstruktiv beleuchtet und analysiert wurde. Im Gegenteil, die Diskussionen über *The Matrix* sind meist kontraproduktiv verlaufen und haben die Kritiker dazu veranlasst mehr Zeit damit zu verbringen die gegenseitigen ideologischen Positionen zu attackieren, anstatt sich mit den komplexen Themen im Film gründlich auseinanderzusetzen.

Schlussendlich hat meine Analyse ergeben, dass einige der besprochenen Artikel es verabsäumen *The Matrix* in seiner Gesamtheit zu verstehen und kritisch zu hinterfragen. Es wäre auf alle Fälle notwendig eine detaillierte und tiefgehende Interpretation des Films zu unternehmen, um aufzuzeigen, wie es die Wachowskis geschafft haben eine Fülle von Ideen, Theorien und Religionen in ihre Geschichte einzufügen und um zu beleuchten, wie eng diese Themen verflochten sind. Zu diesem Zeitpunkt überwiegen eher konservative Analysen des Films und gewagte, revolutionäre Herangehensweisen lassen immer noch auf sich warten.

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